RESEARCH USE FOR POLICY DECISIONS ON EARLY LITERACY IMPROVEMENT IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

by
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Abstract

This paper examines the perspectives of key education stakeholders related to the access to and utilization of research on early literacy improvement in the Dominican Republic. The goal of this paper is to shed light on ongoing efforts supported by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and others to promote evidence-based decision making around literacy improvement by key education stakeholders in select countries of the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, including the Dominican Republic. The theoretical framework for this study combines concepts from the fields of knowledge utilization and behavioral economics, along with ideas from theories of social constructivism relevant to the LAC region in general, and to the Dominican Republic in particular. Qualitative and quantitative data from the Dominican Republic were collected from structured interviews ($N = 22$), with representation from five key stakeholder groups. Findings include new insights into channels of research access, the state of understanding of existent research from different disciplines, and methods of research utilization unique to some stakeholder groups in the Dominican Republic. Recommendations include fostering increased understanding of stakeholder perspectives on research utilization, and the promotion of proven processes for informed dialogue construction.

Keywords: research dissemination, knowledge utilization, stakeholder mapping, early grade reading, early literacy, Latin America, Caribbean, Dominican Republic.

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Acronyms

ADP: Dominican Teachers' Association
AIR: American Institutes for Research
CEDILE: Center of Excellence for Reading and Writing Research (at PUCMM)
CETT: Centers of Excellence for Teacher Training
CIEDHUMANO: Center of Research on Education and Human Development (at PUCMM)
CONDETRE: Dominican Council for the Defense of Teachers' Rights
EGRA: Early Grade Reading Assessment
IDB: Inter-American Development Bank
IDEC: Dominican Initiative for Quality Education
IDEICE: Dominican Institute for Research and Evaluation on Education Quality
ILA: International Literacy Association
INAFOCAM: National Institute of Teacher Training
INTEC: Technological Institute of Santo Domingo
ISFODOSU: Salomé Ureña Advanced Institute for Teacher Training
LAC: Latin America and the Caribbean
LLECE: Latin American Laboratory for the Assessment of Quality Education
LRCP: LAC Reads Capacity Program
NGO: Non-governmental Organization
OEI: Organization of Ibero-American States
OLI: Online Learning Initiative
ONE: National Office of Statistics
PREAL: Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas
PUCMM: Mother and Teacher Pontifical Catholic University
REDEM: World Education Network
REDINED: Spanish Network of Education Information
RED-LEI: Early Literacy Research Network of Central America and the Caribbean
SERCE: Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study
TERCE: Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study
UASD: Autonomous University of Santo Domingo
UCE: Central University of the East
UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNIBE: Ibero-American University
UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USAID: United States Agency for International Development
WWC: What Works Clearinghouse (at US Department of Education)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Primary education in the poorer countries of the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region is of low quality by numerous standards, and it is widely agreed that a part of the problem is the lack of data-driven decision making by education policy leaders (Beggs, 2011; Puryear & Ortega Goodspeed, 2013; Vijil, 2017). Current development assistance by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in the LAC region is designed to boost evidence-based decision making related to early literacy achievement, which is a key indicator of education quality linked closely to future learning achievement and other outcomes (USAID, 2014). Efforts are currently underway to increase the availability and accessibility of rigorously produced research and evidence on what has worked in improving reading. Education policy studies suggest that being aware of and using evidence in educational decision making can help improve educational outcomes as well as make more efficient use of scarce educational resources, particularly in developing country contexts (DeStefano & Crouch, 2006; Murnane & Ganimian, 2014).

The problem that I address in this applied dissertation relates to the gap between the supply of evidence on early grade reading that USAID and others support and the relative demand for it. A great deal of widely accepted, rigorous research studies have been produced on what works in the critical area of early literacy, even in different socio-economic and linguistic contexts (Abadzi, 2014; Gove & Cvelich, 2011; Linan-Thompson, 2014a; National Reading Panel, 2000). Less information is available, however, on how to best go about improving the use and relevance of research for policy decisions by key stakeholders. This is a problem because there is good reason to believe that, across the LAC region, many teachers do not know how to

teach reading effectively (Bustillo, 2015). While the literature identifies multifarious issues with the use and relevance of educational research, the problem I explore is inadequate understanding of the demand side of research, with a focus on research related to early-reading improvement. Framing this problem in terms of supply and demand, as opposed to the standard research to practice divide, is novel because it explores the user experience of research rather than the "problem" of researchers' inability to penetrate an ostensibly black box of stakeholder decision making. In order to optimize the utilization of information, it is necessary to understand how data and research are received, understood, and used by education policy decision makers in the LAC region where USAID assistance is targeted (Lisman, 2012; USAID, 2011).

This paper aims to inform ongoing and future USAID-funded programming related to improving early grade reading outcomes in the LAC region. I focus particularly on the case of the Dominican Republic—a country in which USAID is currently heavily invested and which also suffers from severely low literacy levels—as an illustrative example for other countries where USAID is invested in the LAC region. The Dominican Republic, similar to other countries of the region, is characterized by a largely monolingual language of instruction (Spanish), high levels of socio-economic and educational inequality, and an education policy environment criticized for its lack of transparency and responsiveness to educational research.

In this first chapter, I review the development context for basic education in the LAC region, the basic tenets of the accepted science of early grade reading, as well as the evolution of consensus around those tenets. I also provide an overview of USAID investment in basic education, and reading in particular, in the LAC region. I review the goals of USAID's regional "LAC Reads" project, and in particular the LAC Reads Capacity Program, implemented by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) from 2014-2020. This chapter concludes with an

overview of the acute early grade reading challenge in the Dominican Republic and provides the rationale for my research focus on this country.

Background

Learning to read is a fundamental skill that serves as the building block for all future learning and, collectively, for a country's social and economic development (USAID, 2011). Children who have not learned to read properly display an inhibited capacity to learn in other areas, such as math or science, and over a lifetime are severely limited in their ability to be active participants in their communities and society at large (USAID, 2011). Economic research has also demonstrated that early learning outcomes are directly correlated with a country's economic growth rate; a 10% increase in the proportion of students reaching basic literacy translates into a 0.3 percentage point higher annual growth rate for that country (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2009).

For individual children, studies show that early grade reading competency is critical for school retention and success in future grades (USAID, 2011). This link is especially relevant for children from low-income families and in developing countries, because they are more likely to have home and school environments that are less conducive to early reading development than those of children from higher income families. If such disadvantaged students do not acquire reading skills on time and efficiently, then they are also much more likely to continue to struggle in school and much less likely to complete primary school (Gove & Cvelich, 2011).

State of early literacy in Latin America and the Caribbean. Improved literacy rates have been a shared regional goal (Puryear & Ortega Goodspeed, 2013; Vijil, 2017) across the LAC region for many years. Literacy goals have been featured in numerous sector plans by LAC governments and prioritized in regional pacts. Some improvements have been made, and the literacy landscape is markedly better than that of some other developing regions of the world,

such as Sub-Saharan Africa. The politics and ideologies around literacy and literacy research (for both children and adults) across the LAC region are complex, however, and have been tied to many components of socio-economic and cultural identity, with mixed results. The Cuban revolution in the 1950s prioritized effective literacy of the rural poor, as did revolutionary Central American groups of the 1980s (Kane, 2001). Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) became required reading for both LAC-styled liberation theologians and sociologists studying the burgeoning inequality in the region. Freire later delved into the unique role of literacy in what became a forerunner for the whole-language (in Spanish, the *enfoque comunicativo,* or *enfoque global*) approach in his landmark *The Importance of the Act of Reading* (1983). Indeed, the global "reading wars" of the 1980s and 1990s that consisted of theoretical debates on the most effective methods of reading instruction collided head-on with the evidence-based movements across all social policy sectors. This dynamic became in some ways a new front for similar ideological battles about egalitarianism, social welfare, and education (Briones, 1990; Reimers & Jacobs, 2008). In bridging the divide between research and its application to education, navigating politics became just as important a process as producing effective research. As the education case studies laid out in the 2006 book *Politics of Policies* make clear, the most meaningful education reforms in the LAC region during this time demonstrated a nuanced understanding of both evidence-based approaches to reform and savvy political strategizing (Stein, 2006).

In LAC countries with USAID congressionally earmarked basic education investments, the percentage of the population under 15 years of age is roughly 35% and steadily increasing (USAID, 2014). Without a foundation of basic reading skills, these young people are at risk of becoming part of the "ni-ni" generation—an expression in Spanish that refers to those young

people who neither work nor are in school. This demographic represents as much as 25% of the youth population in some LAC countries (USAID, 2014). These young people are both non-contributors to licit economic growth and at increased risk for involvement in criminal and violent activity, drug trafficking, substance abuse, and, for young women, unplanned pregnancy (USAID, 2014). In short, the risks of missing the window of opportunity to reach early learners and teach them to read are high, and the perils of missing this window are manifold.

Over the last 20 years, there have been major gains in access to and enrollment in primary school across the LAC region (USAID, 2014). However, enrollment, per se, is far from sufficient to generate the benefits of universal schooling. Once students are attending school, it is the quality of education—gauged in large part by learning levels—that determines the value of that education for the students, society, and economic development. A crucial indicator of education quality for the LAC region is early reading proficiency. As evidenced by the USAID-funded Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) that have been conducted across the LAC region, reading levels in the primary grades across the region are comparatively low and mostly stagnant (Gove & Wetterberg, 2011). Moreover, none of the countries where USAID invests in literacy improvement have early literacy scores at or above the LAC regional average (Ganimian, 2015).

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), more than 30% of LAC third graders and nearly 20% of LAC sixth graders who were enrolled in school in 2008 were unable to read or understand basic grade level text, scoring at the lowest two levels (levels 0 and 1) on a scale from 0 to 4 in the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (SERCE) reading test (Ganimian, 2009). These regional numbers remained relatively static in the Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study

(TERCE), the most recent administration of the test (Ganimian, 2015). The Dominican Republic and Guatemala demonstrate some of the lowest achievement rates in the LAC region, with upwards of 50% of third graders scoring at level 1 (inadequate) or below. Equally troubling is the relative lack of level 4 (above-average) readers, ranging from only 1% to 8% in LAC countries (Ganimian, 2015). Low reading achievement is particularly prevalent among primary students in rural and low-income regions, those from indigenous communities, and populations in which the main language of instruction is a second language (Ganimian, 2015).

The UNESCO data on early reading outcomes from SERCE and TERCE suggest that there is relative gender parity for reading achievement in primary education throughout the region, though the level of parity varies slightly from country to country (Ganimian, 2015). Near gender parity is a positive aspect of the literacy landscape in LAC compared to other developing regions of the world. Moreover, the literacy levels in even the poorest countries of LAC are consistently a notch above the averages in Sub-Saharan Africa. Overall, however, it is clear that reading ability remains problematically low for the majority of primary students in poor and developing countries of the LAC region, and this creates major constraints for the development of individuals, communities, and economies therein.

Among numerous factors such as poverty and urban/rural divide, low literacy outcomes on regional and national tests can be seen as the symptoms of long-standing, systemic challenges in education. These include lack of quality teaching and insufficient investment in basic education (Puryear & Ortega Goodspeed, 2013). A different sort of challenge, however, is the lack of evidence used for decision making related to improving reading achievement. Over the past several decades, while reading achievement has stagnated across the LAC region, both the science of learning to read and data on effective early reading instruction and policies have

grown steadily at the global level (Gove & Cvelich, 2011). Although linguistic and development contexts vary, there is a host of robust research available today about what is required for effective early reading programs to be successful as well as cost-effective. It remains unclear how much of this research has permeated decision making at the education policy level in the LAC region, though there are several indications that the levels of understanding and use of such research are not consistent (Puryear & Ortega Goodspeed, 2013; USAID 2014).

The science of early literacy. There is today a basic global agreement among progressive and evidence-minded thinkers in education on what constitutes the most basic elements of successful early grade reading instruction. This, broadly speaking, amounts to an agreement that a blended or balanced approach begins with sound foundational principles of phonics and phonemic awareness and builds towards reading comprehension (Abadzi, 2014; Gove & Cvelich, 2011; Slavin et al., 2009).

Building upon the English-focused US Department of Education's National Reading Panel reports in 2000, Gove and Cvelich (2011) synthesized some of the most important research across the globe to articulate the research-backed consensus on early literacy instruction and learning. Their work is based upon studies of dozens of alphabetic languages and contexts, and it teases out the core best practices based upon available evidence. Most prominently, they suggest the requirement of five basic skills crucial to mastery of reading in the early grades: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Gove & Cvelich, 2011; National Reading Panel, 2000). Sequential and timely acquisition of these skills requires a combination of the best practices commonly referred to as the "five Ts" in instruction: teaching (trained teachers), time (time on task), texts (appropriate and leveled reading materials), tongue (starting from mother tongue languages, where relevant), and testing (use of both formative and

summative assessments) (Gove & Cvelich, 2011; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Best practices have also been adapted for the developing country context and for Spanish, in particular. For native speakers of a given alphabetic language of instruction, the principles for teaching and learning are similar, though early acquisition of Spanish reading skills differs from English and other languages because its linguistic rules are dissimilar (Perfetti, 2003). The primary difference between early English and Spanish acquisition is at the orthographical decoding stage (Perfetti, 2003), in part because English is considered to have an opaque orthography, which means that the sounds and symbols are not always consistently connected (Ford & Palacios, 2015). Spanish, on the other hand, is considered to have a transparent orthography, which means that the symbols, invariably, sound just like they look. Neuroscience research affirms that effective early reading should include explicit instruction of visual symbols and their associations with sound, moving on thereafter to comprehension of text (Abadzi, 2006, 2014).

Linan-Thompson (2014a) synthesized the basic components of successful early literacy instruction in Spanish and in the LAC region, including both for children of families with little to no literacy support outside of school and for second language (Spanish) acquisition for indigenous populations. Linan-Thompson (2014a) described the complex dynamic system of components that interact in the teaching of literacy through the balanced approach for alphabetic languages like English and Spanish. Others have noted that scripted lessons for early learners still acquiring basic literacy skills are advisable and have shown strong results when rigorously evaluated (Davidson, 2015; Hattie, 2008). Based on standardized competencies for English and other languages including Spanish, Linan-Thompson (2014b) has mapped the sequenced competencies for learning basic reading skills in the first three grades. Beginning in first grade

with decoding principles like phonological and alphabetic awareness and moving to comprehension, this sequencing is based upon numerous models of learning that also take into account the linguistic particularities of Spanish (Linan-Thompson, 2014b).

Most of the language and reading environments in the LAC countries where USAID invests possess large populations of non-native Spanish speakers (or in the case of Haiti, non-native French speakers). Those who have synthesized the robust research on second language transition have squarely agreed that the optimal circumstance for instruction is transitioning systematically from the home or native language to Spanish (Gove & Cvelich, 2011, Linan-Thompson, 2014a). Linan-Thompson (2014b) also proposed an optimal sequence and timing of this transition through grade three. Learning to read in the early grades includes beginning with one's mother tongue to initiate the learning process and transitioning gradually and permanently to Spanish after the second year of primary instruction. There is still much debate about how to provide such instruction efficiently and in circumstances where multiple languages are spoken within the same community (Reimers & Jacobs, 2008). It is also important to note that politics, ideology, and even parental preferences for immediate Spanish immersion have sometimes trumped the evidence-based practice of language transition.

Despite the robustness and multidisciplinary nature of the available scientific research, it is apparent that the relevant information from this science is neither consistently available in Spanish nor sought after across the LAC region, and this is particularly true in those countries where USAID invests, such as the Dominican Republic and other countries of Central America and the Caribbean (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2017; Beggs, 2011) There is some indication that the "reading wars" roil on for some in relation to the Spanish language in particular (Goldenberg et al., 2014). There is also reason to believe that science or evidence on

matters of basic education, such as literacy, are simply given short shrift. An earlier survey of Latin American education decision makers suggests that little consideration is given to evaluating evidence or cost effectiveness when making education policy decisions, at either the national or subnational levels (Schiefelbein & Wolff, 1998). Other discussions with key stakeholders, particularly in the Dominican Republic where my research is focused, have indicated that policies, curricula, teacher training, and prevailing pedagogical approaches (or lack thereof) are disconnected from and, in some cases, at odds with established best practices and informed debates based upon prevailing educational research (Mencía-Ripley & Sánchez-Vincitore, 2016).

USAID and other donors that publicly aim to promote evidence-based decision making are not immune to cognitive dissonance or socialized understanding on this subject, either. For many years in the Dominican Republic, for example, USAID funded literacy instruction training for teachers based on precisely the "global approach" that its funded programs today aim to supplant based on the prominence of literacy research emphasizing the inclusion of phonics.

Efforts to support research on early literacy in LAC. Globally, USAID's renewed prioritization of promoting early literacy in the LAC region comes on the heels of millions of dollars in investments toward early grade education quality. For over a decade, USAID's regional education activities in the LAC region focused on strengthening the quality of basic education. Two main activities, both of relevance to current investments in reading, were the regional Centers of Excellence for Teacher Training (CETT) and the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL). CETT was implemented in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America from 2002-2010, where it created models for improving the teaching of literacy in the early grades of primary education while training more than 31,200

teachers and benefitting more than 875,000 children (Beggs, 2011). Funded by USAID through 2013, PREAL worked throughout the entirety of the LAC region to improve the quality and relevance of policy dialogue around education reform as a means to strengthen the social demand for improved quality in education and as a way to build political support for implementing quality-driven reforms.

In 2011, USAID released a new five-year agency-wide Education Strategy to ensure that its global education investments would be guided by the most current evidence and analyses on educational effectiveness, aimed at maximizing the impact and sustainability of development results. The strategy had three main goals: improved primary grade reading skills, improved tertiary and workforce development programs at local levels, and increased access to education in crisis or conflict environments (USAID, 2011).

Based on a USAID-commissioned analysis in 2011 on the state of evidence around early literacy in the LAC region, it was affirmed that "compared to more rigorous research conducted in developed countries, research in developing countries on early literacy and learning outcomes has limited systematic and/or consistent data" (Beggs, 2011). USAID's Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean was set to design a solicitation for a new Basic Education program. The goal for this new line of programming was to refocus education policy reform efforts on the topic of literacy, a subject that was prioritized by USAID's then-new Global Education Strategy. This prioritization for the LAC region was considered appropriate, based on the low reading scores and related education indicators in the countries receiving Basic Education assistance, which included Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Jamaica, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), Peru, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. An important lesson gleaned from USAID evaluations of the PREAL program was that it was successful at informing

the debate around the need for various education reforms, but it was less successful in helping governments or key stakeholders understand how to make policy changes (Puryear & Ortega Goodspeed, 2013).

Since the release of its Education Strategy in 2011, USAID has developed a LAC-specific regional reading project called LAC Reads. The LAC Reads project consists of multiple mechanisms and is meant to address the serious deficit in primary grade reading skills in the region and the lack of solid evidence to guide the design and implementation of effective reading programs. The project as a whole contains three interrelated components that work together to increase the awareness and uptake of cost-effective, impactful practices by ministries of education and key stakeholders in order to increase reading achievement in the region. The first two components of the LAC Reads project focus on contributing to the evidence base on effective reading instruction approaches, and the third component—called the LAC Reads Capacity Program (LRCP)—focuses on disseminating new information and strengthening the capacity to use information in education policy decision making designed to improve early grade reading outcomes.

The overall goal of the larger LAC Reads project is to increase the availability of, demand for, and capacity to use evidence-based, cost-effective practices by key stakeholders in order to increase early grade reading achievement in the LAC region. Key stakeholders are defined to include formal and informal groups and organizations that have significant influence over decisions relevant to this program, and/or that are significantly affected by those decisions, even if they do not have an effective voice in any actual decision-making processes at this time. Initial analysis completed by the LRCP included a mapping of relevant key stakeholders in each priority country. For the purposes of research in the Dominican Republic, I define key

stakeholder groups as those fitting into five broad categories: government, academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donor organizations, and educator groups. This grouping aligns to standard groupings of education policy stakeholder frameworks in related literature (Davis, 2014; DeStefano & Crouch, 2006).

By focusing on these key stakeholders, the LRCP is meant to increase the impact, scale, and sustainability of early grade reading interventions in the LAC region. The program is implemented through four main lines of action: collecting and systematizing evidence on early grade reading for practical use by stakeholders, disseminating up-to-date knowledge about early grade reading, expanding institutional capacity to implement proven approaches for improving early grade reading outcomes for poor and disadvantaged children, and strengthening sustainable platforms to improve early literacy. A foundational assumption of the LRCP is that although literacy research is meant to be useful to key stakeholders, it is not currently easily accessed, understood, or fully utilized by them. If the LRCP can be understood as the supply side of literacy research, the aim of my research is to provide a closer examination of the demand side. Therefore, to better serve the key stakeholders that have been targeted by the LAC Reads and other USAID programming, I hope to shed light on how key stakeholders targeted by the LRCP lines of action view and understand educational research in general, and literacy research in particular.

It is worth noting here that a targeted inquiry into the stakeholder habits of research utilization could potentially be critiqued as overly idiosyncratic. Even a well-meaning literacy advocate might reasonably ask if time for an applied research topic such as this one might be better spent on other practical aspects of literacy improvement and promotion. In an ideal scenario, they would be right. However, an underlying premise of this paper is that donors and

the literacy researchers supported by them must better understand the fundamental dynamics between knowledge production and utilization in the realm of literacy if additional efforts are to become more successful at changing abysmal outcomes. Albert Einstein, an education social constructivist at heart (Hayes, 2007), is widely credited with saying that "the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results." In this sense, an underlying inquiry of this paper is to ask if those of us interested in improving low literacy levels should be doing something different.

Research Context: Education Policy, Early Literacy, and Research in the Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic represents a compelling starting point for this applied research. Aside from being one of the countries targeted by the USAID LAC Reads project, the Dominican Republic presents a compelling case to study. First, the extremely low SERCE and TERCE scores ranked it in last place in the entire region for average percentage of literate third graders (Ganimian, 2015), which is unexpected based on its GDP and other indicators that would suggest it would be more in the middle of the pack for Central America and the Caribbean (see Figure 1, below).

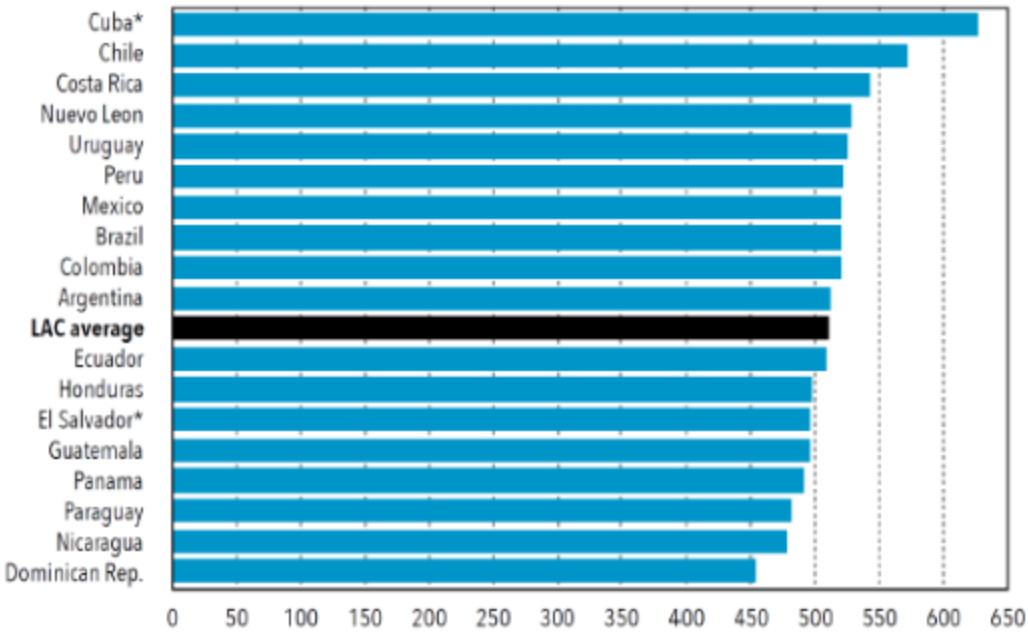

Figure 1. Mean literacy scores for third grade on TERCE. Adapted from *Are Latin American Children's Reading Skills Improving? Highlights from the Third Regional Student Achievement Test (TERCE)* by A. J. Ganimian, 2015, Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.

Using an adapted version of the EGRA from a sample of second graders from 400 public schools, UNIBE demonstrated that average words per minute for the second graders tested was 8.76, compared to the ministry-endorsed expectation that children are able to read 35 words per minute by the end of first grade (Mencía-Ripley & Sánchez-Vincitore, 2016).

Moreover, preliminary discussions that I conducted with key stakeholders and implementing partners suggested that there exists a wide range of beliefs around what constitutes quality and appropriate pedagogy around early grade reading in the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic in 2019 is at a unique moment in its education policy reform history, having recently passed major education reforms, a civil-society backed agreement on education goals

through 2030, and a new national literacy plan (DIGEPEP, 2012; Educa, 2015). The country recently nearly doubled the percentage of its GDP spent on education and is now in compliance with the long-standing legal mandate to devote a minimum of 4% of the GDP to education. This allowed for the implementation of the long-awaited reform of doubling the length of the school day for primary school students in the public system (Lapaix Avila, 2017). Nonetheless, the country still suffers from high degrees of educational (as well as social and economic) inequality, marking the significance of effective early literacy acquisition for the most at-risk Dominican children (Giliberti, 2013).

With this new terrain for policy and curricular review, there would appear to be a window for the necessary evidence-based reforms that can help the Dominican Republic avoid simply prolonging its school day only to find itself with the same worrisome educational outcomes. This window is also affirmed by a stable democracy and relatively unhindered education policy landscape compared to other countries targeted by LAC Reads; teacher strikes are rare, and there have not been any recent economic or natural disasters that divert funds or political will (USAID, 2014).

At the same time, early literacy remains the Achilles heel of the education system. The TERCE data show that 74% of Dominican third graders fell within level 1 (basic skills) in reading. National tests show that the average Dominican elementary school student masters substantially less than half of the intended mathematics or reading curriculum for their grade (Meza, 2013). Taken in whole, available data indicate a particularly low level of achievement in reading in Dominican elementary schools. Relatedly, teachers charged with instructing students in these subjects often are not proficient themselves. Results from an examination to hire new teachers presented by the education NGO Business Action for Education (or Educa) revealed

that almost 60% of the teachers who took the test failed (Educa, 2016).

There is evidence of significant gaps between research, the perspectives of key stakeholders, and what occurs in early grade classrooms. A recent survey of teacher beliefs and practices showed significant disconnects between teacher beliefs about evidence-based best practices, the national curricular directives on the teaching of reading, and teachers' classroom practices (De Lima, 2013; Schecker Mendoza, 2001). Nevertheless, confused or unprepared teachers are not necessarily the source of any evidentiary discordance. My preliminary discussions with numerous education actors in the Dominican Republic revealed a challenging dynamic of discordant views on what constitutes effective teaching of reading to Dominican students. Thus, it is important to better understand the perspectives and dynamics around reading research and evidence at higher levels of decision making, which the LRCP targets and which my research, in turn, does as well.

To be sure, the Dominican Republic's poor results in early grade reading outcomes have numerous socio-economic causes, and numerous obstacles must be overcome if meaningful improvements are to occur. Still, it is apparent that in the Dominican Republic, as in some other countries of the LAC region where early grade reading results remain low, approaches to teaching reading do not adequately account for or integrate global best practices (De Lima, 2013; Puryear & Ortega Goodspeed, 2013). My initial discussions with some key stakeholders, such as ministry of education officials, teacher trainers, and development practitioners in the country, have demonstrated not only a disagreement on the appropriate pedagogical approach for the teaching of early grade reading, but also a longstanding and fundamental disagreement on what research supports these approaches (e.g., Educa, 2015; Meza, 2013; Montenegro, 2011; Moquete, 1986; Schecker Mendoza, 2001).

It is reasonable to argue that many different teaching approaches may work for many types of young student readers, especially if they have the support of a print-rich school environment, parents or families that read to them, and other reliable remedial support (after school programs, tutors, educational multimedia, etc.). However, for the majority of children of the Dominican Republic who find themselves in the first grade unprepared to read on the first day of school, they have "until Christmas," as some literacy programs have taken to saying, to begin to show basic reading competencies at grade-level expectations, such as intermediate phonetic abilities and basic word recognition (Rhodes, 2015). If they fail to do so, and without strong interventions in school or at home, they tend to fall behind and stay behind, which creates vicious cycles for their learning outcome expectations at each subsequent level (Gove & Cvelich, 2011; Mencía-Ripley & Sanchez-Vincitore, 2016).

Some context concerning USAID's literacy-focused assistance in the Dominican Republic is useful, as well. Since 2015, USAID has funded a literacy instruction training program with the Mother and Teacher Pontifical Catholic University (PUCMM, in Spanish), a program with pedagogical principles based in whole language literacy approaches (Montenegro, 2013; Valverde & Wolfe, 2014). An independent evaluation showed reading impacts of this program to be marginal. At the same time, region-wide discussions and disagreements about literacy instruction methods were taking hold. By 2011, awareness of these discussions in the donor community had risen in conjunction with commissioned reports such as the seminal synthesis report on reading instruction best practices by Gove and Cvelich (2011), positing the "five Ts" as the foundation of evidence-based literacy instruction methods. USAID's global office of education began to emphasize phonics-based instruction in new program designs. In the Dominican Republic, as the PUCMM literacy program came to a close, a new competition for a

follow-on literacy program was launched with an emphasis on phonics-based instruction, and this follow-on program was awarded to the Ibero-American University (UNIBE). Despite an embedded theoretical approach of phonics-based instruction, this program's midterm reports also showed marginal impacts on learning levels. Two things became evident: neither USAID nor its implementing partners have all the answers, and evidence-based approaches to literacy instruction did not necessarily have the impact on learning outcomes that were expected.

The LRCP national partner, Educa—a respected NGO that promotes education quality in the Dominican Republic—conducted a key stakeholder analysis on early grade reading in the country in 2015. This document identified a total of 15 key stakeholder institutions and mapped them according to their relative policy interest and influence on the subject on a matrix of "interest" and "influence" levels, ranking as "high," "medium," or "low" (Educa, 2015). This document also helped to chart the relevant policy-making institutions with regard to early literacy in the education sector. It is clear that early literacy policy is crafted within the ministry of education, and within a subset of five to seven ministerial units. It suggests that higher-level education policy (such as budgets or teacher reforms) are conducted within the education commissions of the congress. Moreover, the Educa document also showed the results of a short survey conducted with representatives of each of these organizations, which included questions around what kind of activities or resources produced by the LRCP could most help them. The most highly stated needs included assistance with teacher training efforts, financing for material production, research to assist with literacy monitoring, best practices in literacy teaching, examples of how to involve families, and facilitation of inter-institution exchanges (Educa, 2015).

In sum, the acute challenges of teaching reading to young learners and complex

perceptions of their causes in the Dominican Republic provide a rich context for the types of questions that I explore. Looking at this issue within the Dominican Republic is instructive for the important work that the LRCP is conducting there. Focusing on the Dominican Republic is useful for other countries where the LRCP is conducting activities and as a precursor to future USAID investments in supply-side related to research promotion. Learning to value and understand the unique perspectives and contexts within which key stakeholders operate is an important yet often overlooked aspect of research dissemination, which is why the concept and the field of knowledge utilization, or how information is understood and actually gets used, is helpful to better understand. With this in mind, the next chapter provides an in-depth look at the relevant literature and attempts to situate this research within several useful theoretical and analytical approaches.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The effort to comprehend how key stakeholders have access to, understand, and utilize research on literacy is situated within several relevant domains of literature. To be sure, the "research to practice" paradigm cuts across many disciplines and sub-disciplines, but given the supply and demand paradigm that characterizes what LAC Reads aims to bridge—the fields of research dissemination and knowledge utilization, respectively—it provides a useful and relevant context. With this in mind, two main questions drive this literature review: first, what is known about how to effectively disseminate evidence derived from research on basic education? Second, what is known about how key education stakeholders get access to, understand, and use such information? My primary research focuses on the illustrative context of the Dominican Republic, but this literature review looks at the broader research across the LAC region relevant to LAC Reads, inclusive of that literature in and on the Dominican Republic.

The broad theoretical framework of social constructivism is useful in helping to contextualize the multifaceted endeavor of the LRCP and the complex landscape in which it operates. After discussing this framework, I then review the key themes and findings from available literature on the theory and practice of research dissemination (the supply side) and knowledge utilization (the demand side), examining general literature as well as the relevant literature from education- and LAC-specific contexts. Key themes that emerge include the importance of cultural relevance; a meaningful understanding of and engagement with the social networks and dynamics in which dissemination efforts are conducted; and improvement of mechanisms of interaction between research, researchers, and decision makers, as well as other key stakeholders and beneficiaries.

There exists robust scholarly literature that examines issues in dissemination and use of educational research in the United States. The available literature that examines attempts at disseminating educational research for policy use in lower-income countries, and in the LAC region in particular, is somewhat limited, however. Another noteworthy limitation of this literature review is the heavy reliance on English-language publications and documents, though it does include a thorough attempt to locate the most influential documents pertaining to reading research in the Dominican Republic.

Furthermore, I have attempted to remain flexible on the definition of "research" and for the purposes of this literature review I assume a broad notion of evidence, of which research is a subset. The operational focus of the LRCP is not about terminology or rigidity of research standards, but rather supporting an overall, sound evidence-based approach to policy making, with soundness or robustness of methods, whichever the methods, being the priority. Along these lines, my de facto operating assumption is that valid research methodology runs the gamut from rigorous systematic reviews of evidence and gold standard causal research to descriptive case studies and best practice policy briefs (Bridges, Smeyers, & Smith, 2009); this is looser than most definitions, but my goal is not to advocate for imposition of a strict paradigm but rather to better understand those paradigms that exist in practice. Finally, differentiating the concepts of supply (dissemination) and demand (utilization) in educational research is challenging. While the term dissemination has a fairly clear definition, the term utilization can be interpreted numerous ways. There is, in practice, a good deal of crossover both within the concepts of and in the literature on dissemination and utilization of research knowledge. This literature review distinguishes between the effort to put information out, even if in a targeted way, and the more individualized and socialized process of reading, understanding, and using that information in

education policy decision-making processes. It is this latter construct that leads to a focus on the available literature of knowledge utilization and definitions therein.

Theoretical Framework

There are numerous disciplinary and theoretical lenses from which to view the endeavor to improve literacy rates through evidence-based decision making. It is important to find ones that help ascertain how the targeted beneficiaries of the LRCP—ministry of education officials, school leaders, teacher trainers, and civil society organizations chief among them—receive, process, learn about, and think about research findings related to their work.

At the macro level, the process of engaging policy and decision makers with research and evidence on early literacy improvement can be framed as a social learning process which, in turn, can be explored through the theoretical and practical principles of social constructivism (Cariola, 1996; Hood, 2002). Whereas the broader concept of constructivism in learning posits that knowledge is built or constructed through sequential experiences (Von Glasersfeld, 2005), the concept of social constructivism can help to explain the social aspect of how people build knowledge in relation to their surroundings (Ernest, 2010). Social constructivism as a theoretical framework may be an appropriate lens through which to examine why and how different key stakeholders in Latin American countries view and use research in their professional settings related to education.[1] There is documented reason to believe that cultural and relationship-based dynamics of access to and use of information in educational policy circles in many countries of Latin America, particularly the smaller and poorer ones, can in part be understood through

[1] There is some connection between the principle of constructivism and the "whole language" approach (*enfoque comunicativo*, in Spanish) that pervades the reading wars debate (Reyhner, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, the theoretical framework of social constructivism as it applies to social and cultural learning dynamics among policymakers in the LAC region is not discussed in relation to the actual approaches of teaching of reading discussed in the previous chapter, but rather as a more general philosophical approach to the transfer of knowledge and information.

examination of the social-cultural dynamics that constitute dominant paradigms (Schiefelbein & Wolff, 1998).

From an epistemological perspective, and in the context of research dissemination, it is important to consider the concept of social constructivism in contrast to—though not in diametric opposition to—the concept of positivism (Armstrong, 2013). Whereas positivism places a conceptual premium on evidence as empirical or factual, social constructivism provides a lens to conceive of evidence as learned and understood only through interactions and relationships. For example, while the discipline of economics has generally been premised on a positivist approach, only in recent years has it been complemented by the subfield of behavioral economics. Behavioral economics incorporates a social and psychological approach that applies the underpinnings of social constructivism (Jabbar, 2011). The importance of relationships and communication in viewing human knowledge is borne out in the existent literature as key for understanding the way educational research in general, and research on early grade reading in particular, is viewed in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Before moving to its applicability, it may be useful to briefly contextualize the concept of social constructivism within its original derivation in the broader psychological literature on constructivism. Four well-advanced sub-theories that compare and contrast the overall constructivist perspective are simple constructivism, radical constructivism, enactivism, and social constructivism (Ernest, 2010). Simple constructivism, as both Ernest (2010) and Von Glasersfeld (2005) described it, is the basic function of active learning and integrating new knowledge into existent knowledge. Radical constructivism, in comparison, posits that knowledge is individual and particular to the learner's mind. Enactivism, in turn, is the theoretical melding of constructivism and the cognitivist perspective, insofar as it posits that

learning is active between learners and their external environment. Finally, the lens of social constructivism suggests that learners interact with others as well as their environment, including through the use of language (Ernest, 2010). This is a theory supported by earlier studies of diffusion theory in developing country contexts (Rogers, 2010).

Armstrong (2013) posits that the primary claim of social constructivist philosophy is that "there is no such thing as an objective fact within a social system" (p. 14). This could be seen as a contrast to positivist approaches, which are characterized by a priori deference to scientifically produced information, rather than human processing and contextualization of that information (Hood, 2002). As such, there is an important underlying tension between promoting evidence-based decision making in early literacy and understanding the human behavior of those targeted decision makers.

An appreciation of the human aspects of evidence-based decision making in educational policy settings—which are highly socialized—can be seen as just as important as any particular piece of research on early grade reading. This is a fundamental aspect of the applied nature of USAID's Evaluation Policy (USAID, 2012). Thus, a goal of USAID's LRCP is to leverage the practicalities and realities of social constructivism to advocate for a fuller dialogue around evidence in educational decision making (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within the theory of social constructivism, understanding the role of the facilitator, as opposed to an instructor, is a key theme (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). The focus of the interaction is placed primarily on the learner and his/her experience, as opposed to the instructor(s). This is a crucial defining point of social constructivism that also underpins the conceptual approach of USAID's LRCP, as well as the need to better understand the learning levels of intended beneficiaries of the program.

In McGinn's (1996) edited volume on educational research networks in Latin America,

Cariola wrote specifically on the concepts of research utilization in education circles and found a clear distinction between the use of research "facts" and the socialization, or discussion and understanding, of research information. Cariola, a revered educational researcher in Chile, characterized this difference as one that parallels the gap between positivism and social constructivism as it relates to learning. He concludes that across Latin America, education decision makers tend form their understandings and base their decisions on information from trusted advisors, rather than engaging directly with research themselves (Cariola, 1996). This finding further affirms the relevance of a social constructivist lens for my research.

Furthermore, because the US government (via USAID) provides funds and support (via the LRCP) for educational interventions abroad, there are certain cultural, political, and historical dynamics that are less likely to be overlooked by a social constructivist lens. On the one hand, the financial resources and institutional heft that the US government brings to its educational assistance programs can raise issues that are otherwise considered non-priority in international affairs (such as the literacy levels of poor or disadvantaged children). On the other hand, US government involvement in the educational development issues of foreign countries in the LAC region brings challenges and potential conflicts, as well. Lusthaus and Adrien (1999) lay out a history of donor-assisted capacity development efforts in education, including the dominant theoretical paradigms that have underpinned these efforts. The paradigm of "capacity development" itself emerged in the early 1990s as a process distinct from institution building and strengthening (with a focus on organizations) and with more of a focus on human resources development (Lusthaus & Adrien, 1999). USAID's Education Reform Support Today, a field guide on the pitfalls and promises for providing education assistance, offers an applied look at US-supported assistance for education reform in LAC and elsewhere, teasing out some of the

more effective practices that avoid cultural pitfalls and promote consensus-building, buy-in, relevance, and reliance on evidence and transparency (DeStefano & Crouch, 2006). Overall, however, the history and perception of US and international involvement in education reform in Latin America, whether through research socialization or otherwise, remains a challenging and charged topic for many stakeholders in the region (Ross & Gibson, 2007; Schiefelbein & Schiefelbein, 2000). Lastly, allegations of cultural imperialism and neoliberalism are recurrent themes in critiques of international development assistance, in the LAC region and elsewhere, and especially in the education sector, which has the ability to touch so many cultural nerves (Tabulawa, 2003). Even aside from ideologically charged critiques, the sheer competence of development enterprises has also been questioned, including the currently popular notion of evidence-based decision making paradigms being, in some cases, clumsily foisted upon aid recipient countries without proper contextualization (Kogen, 2018). Because of all these considerations, and because of the role played by the politics of developmental assistance, I believe that the lens of social constructivism is the best tool with which to view possible solutions to the problems of informed policy decisions. That is because the social constructivist paradigm encourages a holistic, subjective look at context and social dynamics, making it more likely to foster the kinds of ideas that will assist programs such as the LRCP to avoid pitfalls and maintain a focus on desired outcomes that lead to increased literacy achievement.

Lastly, as noted briefly above, some literature from the field of behavioral economics offers insight into the socialized knowledge transfer process that USAID and other partners are engaged in with the LRCP. Behavioral economics incorporates "psychological knowledge about human behavior to enhance and extend economic models of decision making" (Jabbar, 2011, p. ii), and the perspective of this sub-discipline can be of relevance to both development assistance

and education policy given its socialized contexts. Kahneman (2011), a pioneer in the field of behavioral economics, has written on how the combination of economics and psychology influences decision making. Datta and Mullainathan (2014) used these principles to create a framework for designing international development assistance based on managing interests of key stakeholders, while Jabbar (2011) took an even closer look at the perspective that behavioral economics can provide in educational decision making. Noting that the sub-discipline tackles the erroneous assumption of unbounded rationality in education policy, Jabbar elaborates upon some of behavioral economics' theoretical concepts as applied to the real world of education policy formulation and decision making. These include prospect theory, whereby decision makers operate in the face of uncertain outcomes; framing effects, such as cognitive biases based on how options are presented; status quo bias, whereby any changes are perceived by stakeholders as a loss; and the paradox of choice, whereby a plethora of policy options based on research can actually cause anxiety or confusion rather than improve decision making (Jabbar, 2011). These concepts can be extremely helpful in attempting to more practically understand how key education stakeholders anywhere perceive the relevance of research findings and how they integrate such findings into their worldview and contexts. In sum, the lenses of social constructivism and behavioral economics are relevant and helpful to an understanding of how key stakeholders behave in the real world of applied educational research.

Literature on Research and Knowledge Dissemination

A large amount has been written, in both academic and popular literature, on the dissemination or diffusion of research information for use in policy decision making. Numerous dissemination and diffusion theories have pervaded different disciplines over time. The disciplines of medicine, public health, and psychology each have robust literature bases

regarding the question of bridging the research to practice gap. Some education scholars believe that the field of education's approach to dissemination of research for decision making in some ways follows on the heels of these other more scientific fields (Scott, Lubienski, DeBray, & Jabbar, 2014)

Diffusion theory, pioneered in the 1960s, was one of the first discipline-agnostic bodies of literature that examined the role of social relationships and networks in the diffusion of innovations. Kuhn's seminal 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* introduced the concept of a scientific paradigm shift—such as moving from a widely accepted understanding that the world is flat to that of the world being round. Rogers's 1963 book *Diffusion of Innovations* (updated in 2010) laid the foundation for the study of diffusion of innovations in the behavioral sciences based upon an understanding of social dynamics. A core concept of Rogers's (2010) original theory on diffusion was the difference between a traditional linear diffusion model (source to receiver) and a convergence model of diffusion (shared and multi-pathway). Diffusion theory has received ample treatment by public health researchers interested in harnessing the power of communications for policy change (Dearing, 2009). In contrast, I found considerably less literature on its particular application to educational research or innovations.

There exist various niches within educational research and innovation dissemination literature, and they vary by the types of research or innovations promoted and the targeted educational stakeholder or end-user. The LRCP is focused on the policy-level education decision maker and on educational research at the primary education level, where early grade reading can be most directly affected. One of the first comprehensive looks at the impact of research on basic education is found in a report commissioned by the National Academies. This report reviewed how research from neuroscience and psychometric studies began to affect policy in the 1960s

and 1970s through direct government support for and endorsement of rigorous standards for social science, at the time an emerging and poorly understood resource for policy decisions in the US (Cronbach & Suppes, 1969). Tyack and Cuban (1995) provide a similar view of the history of educational research's impact on education policy reform in the US. It is clear today that the link between research and policy in the area of education, not only in the US but the world over, is relatively weak and worrisome by nearly any standard, and certainly when compared to other fields of human services such as medicine and psychology (Mehta, 2013; Scott et al., 2014).

Part of the challenge to effective research dissemination on literacy in particular, and in education in general, is that educational research has suffered numerous disadvantages compared to other fields. In general, educational research has been perceived as less rigorous and scientific than even other social science disciplines that apply theory to practice. For years, educational research has openly been the subject of elite criticism, and it has even become the fodder of political and ideological debates that cast as much doubt as certainty about the results of various approaches or interventions studied (Education Journal, 2008; Kaestle, 1993).

Some critics of educational research meant for informing policy cite the enormous and growing volume (over 20,000 articles per year in the US alone) and the lack of rigorous or consistent research methods (Mosteller, Nave, & Miech, 2004). Authoritative claims in educational research are often ignored by policy makers, in part because of the troubled reputation of educational research (Kaestle, 1993; Seidman, 2013), and also because, in contrast to other fields such as medicine, there does not exist a single widely accepted annual or journal that updates practitioners on proven research findings for unified field use (Willingham, 2012).[2] This has led some in education policy circles, including those in the LAC region, to place a

[2] Willingham (2012) notes the exception of the US-based and federally-funded What Works Clearinghouse, though he takes issue with its high standards for inclusion and notes the existence of challenges to its political neutrality.

premium on research from other disciplines, such as economics, sociology, psychology, and neuroscience, because subfields within each of those disciplines have become focused on basic education issues (Schiefelbein & Schiefelbein, 2007) and may be seen as more trustworthy or influential.

There have been various approaches suggested for rectifying the poor reputation of educational research in the US and elsewhere and for improving the supply side of research systematization and dissemination. These range from various systematic attempts at improving the overall quality and rigor of educational research (Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002; Sroufe, 1997); to improving the quality of systematic reviews of relevant and rigorous educational research (Harlen & Crick, 2004; Murnane & Ganimian, 2014); to increasing the coherence of available educational research summaries, such as a "structured abstract" that standardizes findings (Mosteller et al., 2004); to a better coordination of and access to research altogether, such as the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), funded and coordinated by the US Department of Education's Institute for Education Science (IES).

The WWC provides an important example of dissemination of rigorous educational research, and USAID discussions of the WWC with the IES helped, to some degree, to inspire the first two objectives of the LRCP. Established in 2004 with a focus on assisting educational researchers, the WWC's focus evolved to include education policy makers and other key stakeholders (General Accounting Office, 2010). The vehicles for dissemination included new products designed for different users and new modalities for engaging them. The WWC promoted access to rigorous research by using a gold standard set of criteria for inclusion in its database, to the extent that the vast majority of educational research submitted for inclusion was initially rejected. As a result, the project quickly earned the unfortunate nickname "the nothing-

works clearinghouse," which may have undermined its initial goal of bridging the research to practice divide (Viadero, 2008). It later expanded its criteria to include quasi-experimental research as well as its database holdings, which now number in the thousands. With hundreds of millions of dollars in investment and high-level federal support, administrators of the WWC still found it difficult to track the use and influence of a clearinghouse such as the WWC, outside of web hits, media mentions, or anecdotal evidence (Lesnick & Nield, personal communication, August 2013). Former officials at the IES explained that it remains crucial to understand how people use research evidence in their decision-making processes, claiming "even if an intervention's evaluation shows reproducible, positive effects, you don't necessarily expect everyone to replicate it; decision making is complex and contextual" (Lesnick & Nield, personal communication, August 2013).

Aside from the quality and accessibility of educational research, there is some relevant literature on what constitutes effective marketing and communication of educational research for policy use. For example, Heath and Heath (2008) developed a six-point model for effective messaging and argue that effective dissemination approaches are characterized by six elements: being simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, and able to tell a story. McGinn (1996) offers a glimpse at how different tools based in diffusion theory played out to mixed degrees of success, though this edition predates the widespread use of social networking technologies that effectively changed the educational research landscape in the 2000s (Fisher, 2005) and continue to evolve rapidly.

Of particular relevance to the LRCP, there is a good deal of literature devoted to the importance of organizational and cultural relevance in promoting the use of educational research in the US and abroad. Culture plays an important role in understanding the demand side, as I

discuss in the remainder of this literature review, and it also plays an important role in the dynamic of getting high-quality, relevant research into the hands of those decision makers with an ability to use it, including how they use information within existing power structures and social hierarchies (Marshall & Batten, 2004). Just as social constructivism affirms the importance of social relationships in the passing and understanding of information, culture dictates the particular context and norms that essentially represent the unwritten rules of engagement.

Cultural components to research dissemination are useful to consider, particularly in a multi-country program such as the LRCP. Different organizational cultures can play an important role in the process of research dissemination (David & Fahey, 2000), and culture shapes assumptions about what research should be, how it is interpreted, and whether it meets a certain subjective set of prioritized standards. Likewise, culture also determines how relationships, paramount to the knowledge dissemination process, are structured, and those structures facilitate interaction and information flow (David & Fahey, 2000). In the general realm of education policy, culture can serve as an engine or a barrier to optimal information sharing. As Andrews (2013) makes clear regarding interventions in the public sectors of developing countries, “even practices as apparently mundane as financial management standards will not be adopted when they conflict with pre-existing perceptions, cultures, and norms" (p. 1).

In the LAC region, educational research and its dissemination face similar constraints as in the US in relation to their relevance and usefulness to policy makers. As it does in the US, culture plays a major role in educational policy determinations in the region (Armstrong, 2013). Perhaps in contrast to the US, however, there is a belief across the LAC region that a “culture of research” is very weak (Delgado, 2011). There are virtually no full-time faculty members in

LAC universities across social science disciplines, and neither the traditional "publish or perish" imperative of generating bodies of rigorous work nor the peer-review process of publishing are as present as they are in the US. All of this severely limits the role of the academy as an intellectual innovator or enforcer of research standards (Altbach, 2007; Delgado, 2011). The majority of academic and university positions across LAC do not require advanced research degrees, and some suggest that the best academic minds have migrated north or dedicated themselves to more lucrative disciplines than educational research (Altbach, 2007). Perhaps as a result, cultural conceptions of research—particularly in educational research—across much of the LAC region have sometimes tended to focus less on scientific methods in favor of more theoretical and descriptive approaches to educational research (Akkari & Perez, 1998).

Literature on the history of educational research in the LAC region suggests that the evolution of educational research has reflected the tumultuous political and ideological struggles waged throughout the region and in the latter half of the 20th century. Akkari and Perez (1998) provide a review of the major themes and trends in educational research through the 1990s. They identify international and multilateral actors such as the Economic Commission for Latin America & the Caribbean (ECLAC), the World Bank, and the Organization of American States (OAS) that have largely shaped the nature and production of evidence and the promotion of their ties to education policy reform in the region (Akkari & Perez, 1998). Ernesto Schiefelbein, a former Education minister in Chile, has argued that many education elites continue to rely on development agencies and business leaders, noting that individual interests and relationships often trump sustainable efforts at research-backed policy reform across the region (Schiefelbein & Schiefelbein, 2000). Schiefelbein and Wolff's 1998 survey of select LAC region education policy makers' perceptions of emergent cost-effectiveness studies being promoted by

development agencies found that they were making less of an impact than had been expected.

It is important, of course, to remember that the LAC region, despite commonalities in language, history, and culture, is not altogether uniform, and neither are the distinct educational landscapes and challenges therein (Narodowski, 1999). Nonetheless, much of the literature on education, research, and reform in the region deals in broad strokes with common themes and trends that have dominated the regional education policy discourse. Brunner (1993), an initial founder of PREAL in the 1990s, has discussed the high expectations for research-backed policy formulation in numerous sectors, including public finance, social welfare, and education, that existed by the 1980s across most of Latin America and which were followed by relative disappointment. This was owed in part to cultural barriers, distinct as they may be from one place to the next, against the integration of new and outside research (Brunner, 1993).

The 1980s, which some economists refer to as the "lost decade" in Latin America because of long-term public financial crises, also ushered in a host of structural reforms to government finance as well as public services (Reid, 2008). These reforms were in large part supported by multilateral lending institutions, and thus were dubbed neoliberal by some and progressive by others (Ross & Gibson, 2007). With these reforms came a more generalized cross-regional pressure to improve educational outcomes as measured by learning, achievement, and other outputs as well as system efficiency indicators like cost effectiveness and rates of retention and completion. These became characteristics of the growing accountability movement being adopted in assistance programs by development organizations such as USAID in the 1990s (PREAL, 2011). Thus, even though the LAC region remains heterogeneous in many important senses, the imperative for evidence-based decision making in priority fields for development such as education has become a shared regional goal.

Overall, an important and common theme that emerges from much of the literature about evidence-based educational reform attempts in the LAC region is the importance of socio-cultural and professional networks for disseminating educational research. Meaningful networks for open dialogue and debate around key education issues can serve to at once prioritize evidence, build informed consensus and support in civil society for accountability, and, to the degree possible, depoliticize decision making at the policy levels (Reimers & McGinn, 1997). Reimers and McGinn advocated for such an "informed dialogue" approach in their 1997 book *Informed Dialogue: Using Research to Shape Education Policy Around the World*. The book includes cases and lessons from the LAC region and elsewhere in the developing world, laying out an optimal process for constructing fruitful dialogues between researchers and education decision makers. The working model proposed by Reimers and McGinn for bridging this gap is "intended to help the agent of educational research define a context-specific strategy to create knowledge for educational change" (1997, p. 178) and consists of a 9-point sequential, though iterative, model, as shown in Table 1 (below).

Table 1

Informed Dialogue Model

1. Define the change process
2. Define the stakeholders
3. Define the current and relevant flows in policy streams
4. Define what dialogues go on and should go on amongst policy stakeholders
5. Empower groups for dialogue
6. Establish rules for knowledge-based dialogue
7. Design operations to generate knowledge
8. Balance technical, conceptual, and process knowledge
9. Prepare a reporting and dissemination plan

Note. Adapted from *Informed Dialogue: Using Research to Shape Education Policy Around the World* by F. Reimers and N. F. McGinn, 1997, Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger/Greenwood.

Reimers and McGinn's approach is reflective of key tenets of social constructivism as well as predominant theories concerning the optimal dissemination of research for policy use. They start by "recognizing that education systems are not machines but arenas for conflict" (Reimers & McGinn, 1997, p. 44), and they proceed to advocate for interactions that foster transparency as well as a socially-based yet clear understanding of roles, interests, and capacities. This model offers an instructive and applied framework for networking within the LRCP, an important precursor to effective research dissemination and knowledge utilization by key stakeholders.

In sum, educational research in LAC has suffered from various reputational and methodological maladies, a reality which has necessarily influenced the ability of researchers to effectively disseminate their work. It should be clear that the mere dissemination, even if widespread and done efficiently, will not necessarily make research understood or useable. The

era of prioritized evidence-based decision making, pioneered in other fields and later adopted by education, represents an opportunity to rectify some of the ways that educational research has been perceived, as well as received. There are established best practices of research dissemination that include aspects of dissemination theory, relate to informed dialogue processes, and factor in customization processes for target audiences.

Literature on Research and Knowledge Utilization

The second question that this literature review aims to address is: what is known about how key education policy stakeholders have access to, understand, and use research related to literacy improvement? Whereas the first question about dissemination addressed the supply side of research, this question addresses the demand side. In order for dissemination strategies to be effective, clarifying how policy makers see, understand, and use information is critical, as is an understanding of the constraints under which policy makers must operate (Stein, 2006). In an age of global accountability and performance standards, education policy decision makers are at once thrust into the conflated worlds of evidentiary science, educational ideology, organizational management, and, invariably, politics. As one former education secretary noted, "evidence-based policy gets in the way of your prejudices" (Education Journal, 2008, p. 6).

Education policy makers the world over face increasing pressure to make and to demonstrate evidence-based decision-making processes transparently (Briones, 1990). At the same time, education policy, be it at the national or local level, is a continuum, not a "vacuum waiting to be filled" (Bridges et al., 2009, p 4). That is to say, education decision makers are not waiting around to make decisions based on evidence that is not yet available; they must move in real time, pick and choose from what is available, and even make practical and rational decisions that may run counter to what available evidence suggests.

There is also some debate not only about what research should inform education policy, but also about how it should inform education policy and systems, more broadly. Whereas the WWC model is seen by some as the gold standard for research synthesis and accessibility, others argue that picking and choosing interventions or aspects of education policy piecemeal does not account for the idiosyncratic circumstances within the education systems to which they are meant to applied or implemented. This is the central thrust of the debate between Slavin and Tucker (2018), recorded in a joint paper on the question of whether education research should focus on interventions or policy frameworks writ-large. Slavin, who helped design and roll out the Johns Hopkins University's online Best Evidence Encyclopedia, has long advocated for the relevance of easily accessible robust education research that allows decision makers to identify the best evidence available to support particular policy decisions that relate to the circumstances they face (Slavin, 2002, 2004). Tucker, on the other hand, argues that research on specific policy interventions in education will likely fail if they are implemented under what he describes as largely broken education policy frameworks, themselves in need of vast overhauls. It is systemic overhaul, Tucker argues—not piecemeal interventions—that education research should prioritize (Slavin & Tucker, 2018).

The relatively emergent academic treatment of knowledge utilization offers some insight into the complex processes at play in moving beyond effective dissemination to effective integration of research by policy makers (Piety, 2011). The US-based William T. Grant Foundation, which focuses its efforts on the application of research to education and youth issues, has funded a host of research on knowledge utilization in education. Broadly, this literature has looked at how people—including policy makers—make decisions in the cultural, organizational, and political terrains they occupy (Bransford, Stipek, Vye, Gomez, & Lam,

2009). Vivian Tseng (2012), a leading author on the topic in the US, developed a conceptual framework for how US policy makers, such as school boards, view different types of evidence ranging from research and assessment data to anecdotes and experiences, each a valid type of evidence from which to draw upon in their own right, but varied in their uses and levels of influence on decision making. One key lesson Tseng draws is that no matter the type of evidence, it does not speak for itself, and thus appropriate interlocutors of interpretation are pivotal in what amounts to uptake.

Much of the literature focuses on the gaps in and constraints to improved knowledge utilization. As with the dissemination of research, the political nature of decision making in education policy (as in other social science fields) is a consistent hurdle for unbiased research integration—an inconvenience faced the world over (Weiss, 1993). One study on education policy making in the Philippines suggested that even getting education policy makers to understand and appreciate quality and relevant research findings is itself rare enough, much less ensuring that subsequent decisions or policies will ultimately be based upon those findings (Miralao, 2004). Tenuous links between educational researchers and practitioners, both intellectual and social, have also been cited as a barrier to consistently objective interpretation of research findings, with some authors citing an outright mistrust between researchers and practitioners (Nelson, Leffler, & Hansen, 2009).

Some noteworthy and relevant models of educational research utilization have emerged from the literature. In particular, Carol Weiss's seminal 1979 paper on research utilization in the social sciences put forth seven variants of what constitutes research utilization models (see Table 2). Weiss's early taxonomy reflects the range of social science knowledge utilization by policy makers in general and describes the various ways that research and policy decision making

interact.

Table 2

Weiss's Models of Social Science Research Utilization

Model	**Description**	**Key Characteristics**
Knowledge Driven Model	Positivist approach to scientific inquiry: "the thing speaks for itself"	Common in hard science and rarer in social science
Problem Solving Model	Research begat by a policy problem or knowledge gap	Expectation that new knowledge will have direct applicability
Interactive Model	Use of research is one part of a complex process of inputs into ongoing policy questions	Decision makers gather empirical as well as non-empirical information to form opinions in real time
Political Model	Formed policy opinions pre-determine or seek supportive research findings	Legitimate form of utilization as long as research is empirical and findings are not manipulated or misrepresented
Tactical Model	Use of or commissioning of research for strategic purposes, irrespective of findings or outcomes	Can be used for allying with reputable researchers, delaying action, or deflection of policy criticism
Enlightenment Model	Entrenchment of findings of a body of research that, combined, serves to shift policy opinions or paradigms	Under this model, it is rare that one study alone can be cited as paramount
Intellectual Enterprise Model	Research as intertwined with policy; research trends impact policy as much as policy trends impact research	Research utilization not only an "independent variable" in the policy equation, but also a dependent variable

Note. Adapted from "The Many Meanings of Research Utilization," by C. H. Weiss, 1979, *Public Administration Review,* 426-431.

These models tease out some compelling narratives in the continuum of research to policy (and vice versa). In identifying the concentric nature of dissemination and utilization in policy, it becomes clear that "whether or not the best and most relevant research reaches the person with the problem depends on the efficiency of the communications links…" and that, therefore, "the usual prescription for improving the use of research is to improve the means of communication to policy makers" based on a solid understanding of them (Weiss, 1979, p. 427).

This approach can be stymied, however, by the fact that "there are no procedures for screening out the shoddy and obsolete" (Weiss, 1979, p. 430), a critique that clearly remains a challenge in social science today, particularly in educational research. Weiss (1979) also identifies the often less-than-academic dynamic of using research to support pre-determined views as "grist for the mill," though she stops short of judging this pejoratively (p. 428). Finally, Weiss also teases out the notion that the attribution of policy outcomes to social science research is sometimes murky, but still discernible, which is a notion that characterizes her "enlightenment" model. Therein, unlike Kuhn's view of scientific paradigm shifts as caused by a single or small group of revolutionary studies, Weiss (1979) posits that "rarely will policy makers be able to cite the findings of a specific study that influenced their decisions, but they have a sense that social science research has given them a backdrop of ideas and orientations that has had important consequences" (p. 429). This quote is somewhat dated, but the internet age may, ironically, have given rise to such a deluge of information that it is perhaps even more difficult today for busy policy makers to know the primary sources of all their policy recommendations.

Weiss's models have been cited and modified for use in different contexts, and they remain a widely cited touchstone in educational research utilization today (Watson, 2008), as

they help to explain the real world, decision-making circumstances in which education decision makers operate, and which often differs fundamentally from the models of research utilization many researchers assume, or do not conceive in the first place. Paul Hood (2002) produced several theoretical models that seek to explain the social dynamics involved in the research to practice continuum, borrowing from Paisley's early writings on educational research in university communications. Leaning heavily on Weiss (1979), Coburn and Turner (2011) produced a paper that offers a generalized framework for educational research utilization by policy makers, focusing on key points of interactions between research, researchers, decision makers, and stakeholders. That paper furthered the notion that Weiss's systematization of stakeholder uses of research is still relevant and adaptable to different contexts. Piety (2011), in turn, adapted Coburn and Turner's model to include what he dubs a socio-technical framework, which takes into account how technologies such as the internet can mediate and reframe the understanding of information between people and researcher intent. A 2016 report from the National Center for Research in Policy and Practice (NCRPP) boiled down Weiss's taxonomy of research uses to three: instrumental (change-inducing), conceptual (change-guiding), and symbolic (change-validating) (Penuel et al., 2016). Each of these models are thoughtful complements to Weiss's and are useful in shaping my research instrument and analytical approach to the data I collected from interviews with key stakeholders in the Dominican Republic.

Despite several robust theoretical models, very little literature is available in scholarly databases on the opinion or perspectives of policy makers as related to educational research. The aforementioned 2016 NCRPP report discussed findings from a survey conducted among district leaders across the US that demonstrated a fundamental lack of understanding of reliable research

methods by the majority of respondents, with respondents unaware of the advantages of random assignment or the limits to what can be learned from a case study (Penuel et al., 2016). A revealing conclusion of this report indicates that "although most leaders reported that research is viewed as a useful source of information in their district or department, a majority disagreed with the statement that people expected claims made in meetings to be backed up by research" (Penuel et al., 2016, p. 4).

A recent survey of education policy makers in Australia examined factors that influence the use of research, and it highlighted not only the importance of effective dissemination through interlocutors but also the value added from meaningful and continuous dialogue between decision makers and the researchers themselves (Cherney et al., 2012). Schiefelbein and Wolff's (1998) survey of education ministers on what they value in cost-effective policy formulation remains unique in the LAC region. It was the first and only such survey of high level education decision makers that examined the way education policy decisions are made and the kinds of inputs that go into them without assuming that the respondents were steeped in the relevant literature. Its findings help to rank the cost effectiveness of the implementation of a number of popular primary education interventions not only in what the literature suggested, but also in terms of how decision makers perceived them.

Overall, the most relevant and key elements that emerge from the literature on knowledge utilization include the importance of cultural relevance; the need for meaningful engagement with the social networks in which dissemination efforts are conducted; and the importance of improving mechanisms of interaction between research, researchers, and decision makers, as well as other key stakeholder and beneficiaries. Advice, for example, from trusted intermediaries (a policy advisor, or a trade association) is a key factor in the uptake or integration of research.

The lens of social constructivism emphasizes the relevance of culture and complements diffusion theory's emphasis on relationships. Notions of and critical paths to policy are more easily seen as non-binary and are informed by Weiss (1979, 1993, 1999) and others that have studied and written on the broader field of knowledge utilization.

Summary

In response to my first research question regarding what is known on research dissemination in basic education, the literature from various disciplines make it clear that there is a good deal of information on how to effectively produce and disseminate research, though the complexities and perceived weaknesses of educational research make it challenging to discern robustness and to compel its use. There is also a solid representation of effective, tested approaches to teaching early literacy in a variety of linguistic and developmental contexts in the literature, with basic principles about language acquisition and pedagogic best practices well established.

In response to my second research question about knowledge access, understanding, and utilization, the literature suggests that different education stakeholders get access to, understand, and use research differently. The literature I reviewed, however, does not assess stakeholder attitudes and beliefs towards research that might help a program like the LRCP in the Dominican Republic serve their needs. Because the LRCP aims to reach decision makers in a strong position to influence policies and actions around early literacy improvement, it becomes imperative to understand how different actors in positions of influence are predisposed individually and culturally.

It is this second question about the perceptions of research that I explore through my research project in the Dominican Republic, where I interviewed 22 different literacy key

stakeholders about their perceptions of research use. In doing so, I aimed to build upon the information collected on stakeholder mapping by the LRCP, to take advantage of best practices in semi-structured interviews, and to design and pilot an innovative interview protocol. I discuss this design and the data collection and analysis process in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

As noted, an assumption that drives much of USAID's funding of literacy programming in the LAC region is that quality information is not currently adequately accessible, understood, or fully utilized by targeted key stakeholders. There remains, however, a discernible gap in knowledge about *how* different types of key stakeholders would like to and do engage with different types of evidence, and on the overall process of integration into their professional practices related to educational decision making. With this in mind, the main research question that underlies my own independent research is: how do key education stakeholders in the Dominican Republic get access to, understand, and use evidence and research on early grade reading?

The previous two chapters provided information about what is known regarding efforts to disseminate research and the process of educational decision making in the LAC region and the Dominican Republic in particular. They also provided some context about what is generally known regarding the ways that education stakeholders gain access to, understand, and use such information. The literature makes clear, however, that the effort to provide useful knowledge about literacy to key stakeholders must confront a discernible gap between research and practice. This chapter lays out the approach, participants, data collection, analytical plan, and limitations to the methods used for my research on how key education stakeholders in the Dominican Republic get access to, understand, and use evidence and research on early grade reading.

Research Plan

The research question which I have aimed to answer through primary data collection is how do key education stakeholders in the Dominican Republic get access to, understand, and use evidence and research on early grade reading? As various authors cited in the previous chapter

have suggested (De Lima, 2013; Educa, 2015; Moquete, 1986), it is reasonable to speculate that different education stakeholders in the Dominican Republic might access, understand, and use information on education and reading in distinct ways.

Adapting the paradigmatic models of research use and knowledge utilization from Weiss and others discussed in Chapter 2, and based upon initial discussions with key stakeholders in the Dominican Republic, I aimed to build a clearer understanding of the demand side of research on literacy so that efforts to disseminate evidence by programs like the LRCP will be more likely to effectively lead to knowledge utilization.

My research approach consisted of semi-structured interviews with a sample from five targeted stakeholder groups representative of the range of key stakeholders in the Dominican Republic. It is helpful to note that a goal of such qualitative research is the "development of concepts which help us to understand social phenomena in natural (rather than experimental) settings, giving due emphasis to the meanings, experiences, and views of participants" (Mays & Pope, 1996, p. 42). Given that this research is exploratory by nature and intended to obtain information about respondents' attitudes and beliefs, semi-structured interviews were an appropriate tool. They entailed pre-planning of a number of standard questions meant to be replicated across respondents, yet flexible enough to allow for probing and follow-up questions to generate rich qualitative data (Creswell, 2013).

My interview instrument was also informed by the stakeholder analysis conducted by the LRCP and its local partner organization, Educa. The four general purposes of that stakeholder analysis were to identify the key stakeholders targeted by the LRCP; to collect basic information, strengths, and weaknesses related to how key stakeholders operate; to assess their organizations' relative levels of interest and influence in early grade reading; and to begin to explore how the

LRCP could be of assistance to them (Educa, 2015). The stakeholder analysis produced through the LRCP provided basic information by identifying the key actors and how they interacted with the education system in the Dominican Republic. It provided information on how the LRCP can be of support and where particular organizational capacities might be strengthened. It stopped short, however, of examining important questions around knowledge utilization issues discussed in the previous chapter, as well as in framing these issues through the lens of social constructivism. It was not structured to address the particular ways in which key stakeholders perceive the nature of the issues around early grade reading in their country, nor their attitudes, beliefs, and preferences on early grade reading research.

In this light, the analysis produced from the data that I have collected will inform an increasingly stakeholder-driven approach to programming, as well as more effective and appropriate ways to develop and deploy USAID-funded programs and activities. It will not only be useful in program adjustments for the LRCP but also in refining more comprehensive and rigorous data collection efforts by USAID and other donors on the demand side of knowledge utilization in education in the LAC region, and perhaps elsewhere. Moreover, an objective of this research project is to not only generate findings useful in the Dominican Republic, but also to inform future interview instruments and research that might ultimately be subjected to more systematic investigation in other countries.

Participants

The sample of respondents was drawn from contacts at organizations included in the LRCP stakeholder report. Because the names of specific individuals from that report were kept anonymous, I did not aim to include or exclude individuals based on their participation in prior interviews; subjects from each targeted organization were chosen based a number of factors

including adequate senior profile, recommendations from trusted contacts, and availability. Moreover, the list of organizations I targeted for inclusion in my interviews ($N = 22$) is slightly larger than that of the analyses produced by the LRCP, with the aim of including three to five illustrative and relevant subjects per stakeholder category in order to provide a well-rounded illustrative sample. The sub-sample comprising each stakeholder group was designed to be illustrative insofar as the participants chosen to represent each stakeholder group were vetted as appropriate representatives given the targeted position levels at each organization. Additionally, I attempted to include only those individuals with strong reputations and experience in literacy. Aside from using the LRCP stakeholder analysis to determine organizations, I held prior discussions, in confidence, with trusted professional and personal contacts in the Dominican Republic about the individuals selected for participation, aiming to select individuals with strong and relatively mainstream reputations in their respective organizations.

Given the small sample sizes, data saturation or repetition of reflected attitudes amongst each group was the goal in order to determine if the sample could be considered illustrative, though not necessarily representative (Mason, 2010). Within each targeted institution, I created a list of specific positions and/or individuals who were well positioned to speak as knowledgeable respondents for their respective institutions. For these individuals, basic inclusion criteria were set at being a senior academic or program manager for government and NGO sectors, and senior faculty, administrator, or researcher for the academic sector. I vetted my list with the LRCP and its local partner as well as personal contacts before proceeding. In cases where a targeted respondent was not available, suitable alternates representative of the same institution were sought through the same initial process of selection as described above. Table 3, below, provides

a summary grouping of the stakeholder organizations and participants that were targeted and ultimately included.

Table 3

Key Stakeholder Groups Targeted in Dominican Republic (N = 22)

Key stakeholder group	Parameters for inclusion	Number of institutions included	Institutions included	Interviewee positions
Government	Ministry of Education & governmental agencies, with influence over literacy-relevant education policy	6	Basic Education Unit, Early Education Unit, Evaluation Unit, ISFODOSU, IDEICE, INAFOCAM	Senior Academic or Program Managers
Academia	Institutes of higher education that research basic education and/or provide teacher training	6	PUCMM-CH, PUCMM-CEDILE, UNIBE, UASD, INTEC, UCE	Education Faculty, Researcher or Manager
Non-government Organizations (NGOs)	Non-profit institutions identified by LRCP partner as engaged with literacy activities	4	Centro Poveda, Dream Project, Educa, Plan International-DR	Senior Program Manager
Donor Organizations	National and international sources of funding with demonstrated interest in early-primary grade reading outcomes	4	UNICEF, OEI, USAID, Inter-American Development Bank	Senior Program Manager
Teacher / Educator Organizations	Associations or unions of educators	2	ADP, CONDETRE	Senior Representative

Note. Elaborated by author.

It is also worth highlighting that since the goal of this study was to learn about individuals from key stakeholder institutions who are in positions of influence and hold decision-making authority on literacy-relevant education policy, classroom teachers themselves were not included. One could make a convincing argument that no education stakeholder group other than classroom teachers is in a higher position of direct influence on literacy outcomes. I would not take issue with that argument, but this study adopts the approach that classroom teachers are the implementers of education policy as opposed to the deciders of it (though they certainly have an extremely important role in informing it). Logistically, including classroom teachers in this study would be a challenge given the sheer number of them in the country, as well as the extreme variance likely to be found within a small sample. Furthermore, and more importantly, other robust and recent studies in the Dominican Republic (e.g., De Lima, 2013: Montenegro, 2011) have been conducted that shed light on primary teacher habits and beliefs pertaining to information on early literacy, so this study does not need to replicate those findings.

As such, the focus on the government stakeholder group was placed on the eight most relevant units at the Ministry of Education. Those eight units included: *Dirección de Información e Análisis*, the *Dirección de Evaluación*, *Dirección General de Currículo*, *Dirección General de Educación Inicial, Dirección General de Educación Básica*, *Dirección, Instituto Superior de Formación Docente* (ISFODOSU), *Instituto de Formacion y Capacitacion del Magisterio* (INAFOCAM), and *Instituto de Evaluación e Investigación de la Calidad Educativa* (IDEICE). Respondents from six of those units were ultimately included in the interviews, while two units (*Dirección de Información e Análisis*, and *Dirección General de Educación Básica*) were not included because of timing or availability issues (Cámara de Diputados, 2018).

Members of the Dominican congressional and senate education committees were initially

targeted for participation in this study as important key stakeholders with high influence, but they were ultimately left out once it became clear that the interview protocol designed for this study would be too detailed about educational research and literacy issues, niche topics with which most members of the commission would not be closely familiar given their focus on higher-level and sector-wide policy issues.

Lastly, interviewees from some key stakeholder organizations identified by Educa (2015) were targeted for inclusion in this study but not ultimately included because of timing or availability. These organizations included *INAIPI*, *Sur Futuro*, and *Fe Y Alegria*.

Interview Instrument

The design of the instrument questions took into account the instrument used and findings from the stakeholder mapping (Educa, 2015) and was informed by Weiss (1978), Reimers & McGinn's *Informed Dialogue* (1997), as well as authors on related aspects of behavioral economics such as Jabbar (2011). The 10 questions devised for the instrument were initially sequenced to move from coverage of respondents' views on access, understanding, and utilization of literacy research, but were later (and iteratively) adjusted to include probes on one or more of those three key concepts. Each question in the survey was coded with one or more of those three key codes (ACC, UND, and UTIL) in the final versions of both the Spanish and English instruments, which are included as appendices to this paper (see Appendices A and B). The pre-coding of questions was useful in the coding of the interview data, which was freer flowing as a result of the conversational nature of the interviews themselves.

The instrument began with fairly straightforward questions on respondent details, which also served as an appropriate starting point to encourage respondents to become self-aware and reflective on their own perspective of the topic. The subsequent questions on access to literacy

research were designed to gauge recognition of key stakeholder organizations identified by Educa (2015) and to elicit proactive responses on key sources and channels of access.

The next series of questions in the instrument was focused on understanding and was meant to probe the degree of understanding of research on literacy. This presented a challenge, however, because it would not be appropriate to ask high-level respondents to read a paper and probe them on the degree of their understanding, nor would that necessarily be informative or representative of their overall understanding even if it were appropriate. With this in mind, the approach I took to these questions was to gauge the respondents' preferences on literacy research (and research in general) in order to ascertain a fuller picture of the way they perceive research that is useful, what characteristics it generally has, and how their user experience with such research can be characterized. Starting with question 6, I employed the use of a Likert scale (1-5), with 1 being the least important, agreeable, or useful, and 5 being the most important, agreeable, or useful (depending on the question asked). With these questions, I chose to employ quantitative responses less out of interest in creating statistically significant quantitative data (which I could not do given the low sample sizes), and more out of interest in using a comparable scale that would help anchor responses and allow respondents the chance to explain why they landed higher or lower on a given question.

Questions 7, 8, and 9 were designed to elicit respondent perspectives on utilization, or how they used research in their professional settings towards the general goal of improving literacy. As with understanding, the concept of utilization presented a challenge for question design. I came to the conclusion that a straightforward question along the lines of "how do you use research?" would not have been conducive to an open response. As a result, these questions were informed by the predominant themes laid out in Educa's key stakeholder mapping (2017)

as well as other literature on the state of literacy in the Dominican Republic. I continued using a Likert scale for questions 7 and 8; I did this in part for the same reason explained for question 6, and in part because questions 7 and 8 also included probes on understanding. I also did not want to split up any of the Likert scale questions, and I felt it would be more conducive to the flow of the interview to keep them together and similar in nature, a best practice noted in the literature on instrument design (Creswell, 2013). The last question (10), on the state of research culture in the Dominican Republic, was added because of preliminary conversations when piloting the instrument that suggested that this concept was useful in eliciting responses about the state of research production and use in the country.

Data Collection Plan

Interviews were conducted in person or online via Skype, with the aid of a semi-structured interview script in English and with professional Spanish translation (see Appendix A for the English version and Appendix B for the Spanish version). The interview script was designed to correspond to the three key concepts in my research question. Most of the interviews were conducted by me in Spanish, with exceptions where it was mutually agreed upon in advance to conduct the interview in English. In several cases where interviewees were difficult to reach via telephone or in person, they responded to the interview prompts via email, with some follow-up discussion also conducted via email. With the permission of each respondent, each interview was recorded and later transcribed. Respondents were informed that their names would not be used in any publication, nor would any detailed description of their position that could betray anonymity. The audio or video recordings were used with express oral permission of respondents and the transcriptions of those interviews along with my own field notes constitute the raw data produced for subsequent analysis. Field notes were used to note points

worthy of emphasis, significant changes in behavior or tone, or other contextual factors difficult to gauge from an audio recording alone.

Analytical Plan

The primary data for coding and analysis were the written transcripts of the interviews and my accompanying notes. In coding the interview transcripts, I looked for the following key themes that corresponded to different questions in my instrument: perceptions of the state of early literacy, channels of access and key sources, and research preferences. I also coded by respondent types, using the five aforementioned key stakeholder categories. Finally, my coding process aimed to break down the data by the three overall components of my main research question: (ACC) access, (UND) understanding, and (UTIL) utilization. Any further iterations of coding were based upon the identification of possible emergent themes or ideas borne out of the interview data that did not fit cleanly into this analytical plan.

In analyzing the data, I used both an inductive and deductive approach, using my research questions to group data and look for emergent themes, similarities, and differences, as well as starting with the above set of initial themes for coding (Creswell, 2013). This process also facilitated the generation of new themes and codes useful for the analysis stage. In my initial analysis phase, I determined the range of responses by themes and sub-themes. In my secondary analysis, I coded recurring and/or divergent responses, looking for patterns within themes and patterns within or across respondent types (even if such information is not generalizable), and I identified the need for any follow up-interviews or subsequent rounds of coding and analysis to adequately capture the range of topics that emerged in the data (Creswell, 2013).

Data Validity and Reliability

Keeping in mind the applied and qualitative nature of my research methods, I attempted

to employ a number of best practices to ensure general data validity, or how well a question or instrument measures what it sets out to measure, and reliability, or consistency within the employed analytical procedures (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Litwin (1995) identifies four types of data validity in social science research: face, content, criterion, and construct validity. Both face and content validity were assessed by piloting the interview protocol and getting general reactions to the questions. Because the interview protocol was designed in English but was translated to and implemented in Spanish, there were some inherent risks to content validity that needed to be addressed. Key terms and concepts that ran the risk of being lost in translation were carefully examined in Spanish. As a fluent but non-native Spanish speaker, I shared both the English and Spanish pilot versions with native Spanish speakers knowledgeable of the field who were not involved in the study to ensure that translation was optimal and that key operating terms were consistently used. I did the same once the final analysis (in English) was produced so that it could be compared to key terms in Spanish apparent in the raw data. To be sure, the fluidity of languages during my data analysis phase may have presented challenges to content validity, since I ran the risk of interpreting or translating key terms of phrases incorrectly. The fact that all interviews were conducted in Spanish using the same instrument helped mitigate that risk, since all my analyses began with the same terms or phrases. Where terms or phrases differed, I was careful to ensure that I was consistent in my translation or interpretation and, where appropriate, triangulated term and phrase usage across all responses.

Criterion validity, or the measure of an instrument or indicator against a "gold standard" version for predictability (Litwin, 1995), was more difficult to assess. As my data set was predominantly descriptive, it is not appropriate to assess its predictive ability, since it is

essentially absent. Construct validity was also difficult to assess before implementing the instrument because it requires multiple points of observation and extensive piloting and comparison, among other options for testing, which were not feasible for the scope and resources of this study. Some questions in the survey seemed adequate in piloting but were later revealed to be subject to demand characteristics (question 8, for example, on preferred disciplines of research) or to the inclination of respondents to provide answers they believe are being sought or to be "correct."

Some literature regarding data reliability in qualitative social science research suggests that no gold standard tests exist (Noble, 2015) or that it shouldn't be tested at all (Stenbacka, 2001), while others, particularly qualitative research guides using an inductive approach such as grounded theory, suggest that the more appropriate term to use is "trustworthiness," which can be measured by any number of common-sense criteria (Kolb, 2012). This latter approach is the one I employed in assessing how reliable or trustworthy the interview data I collected from respondents was. I attempted triangulation in the instrument design by subtly repeating or re-asking questions in different ways so as to tease out internal consistency of responses and the overall trustworthiness of the data. For example, questions 6 and 7 of the survey both attempt to ascertain preferred characteristics of research documents by rating responses on a Likert scale of 1 through 5, but several of the same concepts are repeated in different ways. The vast majority of respondents were consistent in their responses across these items (if not in some instances subject to demand characteristics, as noted above).

I piloted the interview instrument with several USAID and LRCP colleagues to attempt to avoid or mitigate some common and perceived threats to construct validity, such as unclear definitions of research and evidence, evaluation apprehension, and confirmation bias (Creswell,

2013), and I then made appropriate clarifying adjustments to the final interview protocol.

In conducting interviews with the targeted Dominican respondents, I utilized follow-up questions and probes, some of which were built into the interview instrument, to help clarify terms and allow for optimal comparability amongst participants in my analysis. In other cases, using the script to elicit more open responses was important for gauging the optimal direction for probes. For example, it would not likely have been productive (nor prudent) to ask respondents how well they understand different types of research on literacy. As such, it was valuable to begin the interview sessions with a relatively open inquiry into how different individuals perceived the collective knowledge about literacy and upon what they based that knowledge. Finally, sampling validity depends in part upon the assumption that the LRCP conducted a thorough investigation into the most appropriate key stakeholder organizations. As noted, however, I did include about 10 new or different organizations beyond what the LRCP study included.

In sum, though not the same endeavor as in a purely quantitative data collection process, taking steps to both ensure and demonstrate data reliability and data validity is important in any social science research study, particularly when the data sources are self-reports about attitudes, beliefs, or opinions (Litwin, 1995). I aimed to do this primarily through continual vetting and triangulation of samples, participants, and emergent ideas with the LRCP and its project partners.

Limitations

This research approach and methodology contain a number of important limitations that merit description. The sampling of the interviewees is non-random and based on subjective assessments as to which stakeholders in the Dominican Republic would be relevant as well as accessible and amenable to participation. The sampling process was further limited by the fact

that, due to time and travel constraints, only stakeholders from Santo Domingo and Santiago, the two main cities of the country, were considered. These two cities represent a large percentage of the country's population and also serve as the epicenters of education policy decision making, academia, teacher training, and NGO organizing, and thus are appropriate places on which to focus (Mencía-Ripley & Sánchez-Vincitore, 2016), but they undoubtedly do not represent the universe of perspectives in the entirety of the Dominican Republic.

Selection bias played a role in the ultimate determination of participants. Those with email access, those inclined to participate and respond, and those already chosen by the LRCP formed the pool of my potential interviewees. This plays a role in interpretation of the data and the drawing of conclusions, since it is possible that those not inclined or able to participate in interviews with me could have systematically different attributes that might impact the way they would respond to the interview protocol. This is not a significant concern, however, first because the universe of organizations is now well documented, and so it is unlikely that many other organizations of interest and relevance to this study exist in the country. Second, the initial list of targeted individuals at each organization (29) was not much larger than the final list of those who participated (22). Among those seven that did not participate, only three individuals did not respond at all to several requests via email or telephone calls. Two of those three were union representatives with whom I did not share any direct connections in common, and who may not have regular access to their email accounts. The other five individuals responded to me but ultimately expressed, directly or indirectly, that they were unable to participate due to time constraints. Looking at the list of the seven that did not participate, I did not see any patterns or commonalities that would suggest a selection bias in need of further exploration.

In interpreting qualitative data borne of an interview protocol that I devised, confirmation

bias is something that is very difficult to mitigate. Mitigation was attempted primarily through the validation and consistent use of the same interview protocol and through a consistent, pre-validated coding and analysis plan of the data, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Moreover, self-reported attitudes and beliefs, as my data collection plan aims to assess, are multidimensional and, as such, can be particularly difficult to compare or contrast meaningfully or reliably using non-statistical sampling methods (Dillman, 1994). This was another reason that it was important to utilize the same semi-structured interview script to ensure that a comparable set of basic questions were posited to all interviewees, and to have taken steps in analyzing the transcripts to ensure that both the conversational context and background of interviewees is taken into account. Regarding the useful heuristic construct of key stakeholder groups, some limitations also apply (Davis, 2014). The five group types targeted for inclusion in this research project are considered a relatively standard deconstruction of key stakeholder types in education. It is also the case that about a third of the interview participants self-identify or are identified by others as representative of more than one group (for example, an NGO official that teaches a graduate course at an education school, or a former academic that is now employed at the ministry of education). Because of the high potential for overlap among stakeholder groups over the lifespan of participants' professional careers, I focused my interview questions on the personal perspectives of individuals as it related to their current work in their current organizations and made notes, where possible, if it seemed that some of their perceptions could be influenced by prior experiences in other stakeholder groups.

Finally, and as mentioned earlier, the data collected constitute preliminary research with findings not necessarily meant to be broadly generalizable. The results and conclusions drawn from these data are mostly specific to the Dominican Republic. As such, while the goal of this

study is in some part to inform analyses in broader contexts, firm conclusions about the differences between key stakeholder groups or generalizability to other countries in LAC or elsewhere cannot be reliably drawn. In some cases, the data are suggestive of perspectives that correlate to larger trends noted in the literature, and in such cases I am more comfortable speculating about their generalizability.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

In this chapter, I present an analysis of the data collected from the structured interviews with stakeholders. First, I provide an overview of the data collection and analysis process, including notes on fidelity of implementation and the quality of the data set. Second, I provide an overview of the participation by stakeholders as respondents in the interviews, including aggregate and demographic information on them. Third, I lay out the key findings, organized by the three key themes of the research question around access, understanding, and utilization.

Data Collection and Analysis

Overall, the instrument served as a useful anchor for the conduct of these conversations, which in every case included the same Likert scale questions about research preferences. In the conduct of the interviews, I prioritized probing around concepts of understanding and utilization, as these tended to elicit more thoughtful responses than questions on access. The questions focused on access (3 and 4) were among the least successful in eliciting forthcoming or impactful information from participants; this may have been due to the leading nature of the interview prompts and the lack of a graded scale for respondents to assign value. At the same time, the relative influence and interest of key stakeholder organizations of early literacy improvement in the Dominican Republic had already been documented by Educa and AIR (2017). While the sequencing of the interview questions was originally intended to cover access, understanding, and utilization issues in order, the implementation of the instrument in practice resulted in more free-flowing dialogue that did not always maintain the order of themes.

Analyzing the interviews iteratively with an eye towards of each of these themes was productive in teasing out higher-order findings that, on the aggregate, allowed me to synthesize the most relevant findings about each of the three key themes. Because the interview transcripts

were not strictly sequenced or organized by theme as originally intended, the coding process first entailed an organizing of the data by the three key codes (ACC, UND, and UTIL), which was conducted on a spreadsheet. From there, key quotes, counts, and ideas were tagged in the spreadsheet with these codes so that they could be sorted accordingly and viewed side by side. The Likert scale questions were aggregated, averaged, and displayed as tables throughout this chapter. Finally, a review of significant field notes was made, and noteworthy comments were added to the spreadsheet, where appropriate, to convey noteworthy changes in behavior, tone or other contextual factors.

Participation

The final tally of participation is summarized below (Table 4). Discussions with Dominican colleagues confirm that the 2:1 female to male ratio of participation in this study is roughly representative of the Dominican education sector in general. It is worth noting that teacher gender ratios are much more highly weighted towards females (at upwards of 5:1), while education stakeholders with influence and seniority in the institutions targeted in this study tend, on average, to have a much higher concentration of males than in the Dominican teaching profession at large. As of 2018, the 15-member education commission of the Dominican Congress, for example, consists of four females and 11 males (Cámara de Diputados, 2018).

Participants were not asked their age, but rather were grouped into estimated decade bands (40s, 50s, etc.). Three were in their 30s, 10 were in their 40s, six were in their 50s, and three were in their 60s. Participants had an average of approximately eight years with their organization, although this varied widely (those with less time were, in some cases, recently with another key stakeholder organization; no literacy or education novices were included). Twenty of the 22 interviewees reported holding a master's degree or higher; 10 reported holding or nearing

completion of a doctoral degree. Eleven of the 22 reported having formally taught in the Dominican Basic Education system at one point in their lives; seven reported having taught at the university level at some point in their lives, including those currently teaching at that level. Although I do not have such detailed information for the seven targeted stakeholders that did not participate, there is no indication that they differ fundamentally from those that did participate. In each of those seven cases, I attribute their non-participation to lack of availability or interest; either they did not reply after several attempts to reach them via email or telephone, or coordination was ultimately not possible.

Table 4

Disaggregated Summary of Interview Participation

Key Stakeholder Group	Total	Total Targeted	% of Targeted
1-Dominican Government	6	8	75.0%
2-Dominican Academia	6	6	100.0%
3-Dominican Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)	4	6	66.7%
4-Donor Organizations	4	4	100.00%
5-Dominican Teacher Unions	2	5	40.0%
Total	**22**	**29**	**75.9%**
Male	7 (32%)	10 (34%)	70.0%
Female	15 (68%)	19 (66%)	78.9%

Note. Elaborated by author.

Overview of Findings

Access. The interview data, on the whole, makes clear that access to useful and well-produced data and literature on early grade reading in the Dominican Republic has significant bottlenecks, though not necessarily ones that seem to concern many stakeholders. From the types of research preferred to the sources of provenance, the key stakeholders interviewed neither have access to the wider world of early literacy research nor actively seek such access. Questions around the culture of research make it clear that not only is rigorously-produced research not being conducted by the vast majority of information-generating institutions in the Dominican Republic, but the demand for highest caliber research is also relatively low. Outside of academics, there was a low overall awareness of the wealth of research produced and of the places (such as online or in journals) or of the sources (such as key individuals and institutions) where this research can be found. Even among some academics interviewed, particularly those with advanced degrees from outside the country, there was some sense that the culture of research in Dominican academia and even NGOs was itself part of the problem. One respondent noted that there exists a pervasive "mindset where lack of student learning is seen as being outside of the teachers control, and there is an attitude that it cannot be impacted by changes in curriculum, teachers, and instructional strategies," even if research backs those changes up. The same respondent noted that:

> This attitude often is present in the universities where, it is important to note, few if any of the professors hold doctorates; most education professors are practitioners, not researchers and I think this can translate into them teaching based entirely on their personal opinions or experiences and not based on research-supported best practices.

This, it was suggested by the same respondent, may have the effect of closing off university professors from new or innovative channels of access.

Across all interviews, there was relative consensus about the key organizations within the Dominican Republic that produce or facilitate the most reliable information about early literacy. These included IDEICE, PUCMM, OEI, Centro Poveda, and Educa (each were positively identified from the list of most relevant sources by over half of all respondents). To a slightly lesser degree, though still noted, were UNIBE, INTEC, and Inicia (each was positively identified from the list of most relevant sources by at least five respondents). This generally agreed with the findings from the Key Stakeholder Analysis report by Educa (2015). USAID, UNESCO, UNICEF, the IDB, and the World Bank were noted consistently as reliable international sources. The International Literacy Association (ILA) was noted as a key regional network, to a large degree, and so was the LAC Reads Capacity Program's network, although to a lesser degree. Only several interviewees suggested that there was a lack of any reliable sources on early literacy. One government official explained that "here, there are very few people or organizations that research that topic," which she suspected differed from other countries where literacy rates were higher.

Respondents repeatedly mentioned the ministry's Evaluation Unit (IDEICE) INAFOCAM, and the National Office of Statistics (ONE) as the organizations that they saw as the most useful or reliable official government sources of information. For the ministry officials interviewed, INTEC, PUCMM, Poveda, and OEI were cited repeatedly as trusted sources of on-the-ground information (as opposed to "research"). This distinction prioritized the value of information (such as information on classroom management and teacher training) that was drawn from experience within school environments as opposed to research that was written or

conducted outside of the school environment. Some of these respondents felt that research often runs the risk of being "disconnected from the practice of teaching and learning," as one government respondent noted. Each of the organizations listed above, notably, are widely recognized for their involvement with ministry and donor-funded literacy instruction programs in the recent past.

Among journals, magazines, or online databases mentioned as the most relevant or useful, several academic respondents mentioned the Spanish journal *Ocnos*, *The Latin American Education Journal*; *Reading, Writing, and Discover*; the *World Education Network* (REDEM); and the *Spanish Network of Education Information* (REDINED). The only source mentioned multiple times (four in total) as reliable and useful was the *Listin Diario*, the Dominican newspaper of record. One respondent (from government) noted that *Listin Diario* at one point in the recent past had a literacy promotion insert titled "Plan Lea," which was coordinated with the MINERD for content and timed with national reading campaigns.

All respondents replied that they used Google Search actively, though only five (three of them academics) responded that they used Google Scholar (*Google Académico*, in Spanish) when looking for literacy research or evidence.

Asked about the individual people they most relied upon as a source of information on literacy, the names that most often came up were: Dinorah de Lima (IDEICE), Liliana Montenegro (CEDILE/PUCMM), Monica Volonteri (Ediciones SM), Ancell Scheker (Evaluation Unit at MINERD), and both Ruth Saez and Wanda Rodriguez (Puerto Rican academics). This information affirms (if not mirrors) Educa's matrix of key stakeholders, grouped by level of interest and influence, which named the Basic Education Unit at MINERD, ISFODOSU, Poveda, and PUCMM as the most interested and influential, adding a level of

individual specificity not sought in the Educa report (Educa, 2015).

Overall, and in line with the related literature outlined in Chapter 2, the interview data across all stakeholder types except for academics suggests dependencies on key sources of information rather than a breadth of research channels. Overall, the data gathered from the interviews does not offer enough evidence around why this is the case, though in some cases I speculate that some closing off of channels of access is a means of perceived efficiency or convenience. If this were to be true, it might help explain why MINERD policies around the teaching of reading had, for so many years prior to the curriculum reform begun in 2014, remained unchanged and seemingly disconnected from the wider world of evidence-based best practices in early literacy pedagogy.

Among the government officials interviewed, there was wide recognition that PUCMM, INTEC, and OEI (the three providers of donor-assisted and ministry-sanctioned early literacy training providers for much of the 2000s) are highly trusted purveyors of information on early literacy in the country. PUCMM was invariably mentioned first or as the most trusted. Of international organizations, only USAID, UNESCO, and the World Bank were mentioned as trusted sources for the ministry more than once (UNESCO was mentioned in three interviews). The Evaluation Unit of the ministry and IDEICE were both mentioned more than once as trusted public sources of literacy information. No specific journals or specialty publications were mentioned, though the *Listin Diario* was mentioned by one government official as a reputable source of journalism on education, including literacy. Key individuals seen as experts or conduits of literacy information that were mentioned more than once include Liliana Montenegro and Dinorah de Lima. International experts mentioned more than once included Ruth Saez, Wanda Rodriguez, Ana Teberosky, and Emilia Ferreiro. No one proactively mentioned the literacy

database of the LAC Reads Capacity Program.

As might be expected, the academics interviewed considered their own institutions or universities to be important sources of literacy information in the country, although they also named PUCMM consistently as an important national source. The listing of sources on the interview prompt was mostly affirmed, and a wide variety of international sources was noted with only the International Literacy Association (ILA) being proactively mentioned more than once. Some specific journals were mentioned, including academic journals from Spain and the United States. The *Listin Diario* was repeatedly noted as reputable, as well. All academic interviewees noted the importance of Google Scholar. Two proactively mentioned the literacy database of the LAC Reads Capacity Program. Key national individuals seen as experts or conduits of literacy information that were mentioned more than once include Liliana Montenegro and Dinorah de Lima. International experts mentioned more than once included Charlotte Danielson (a US teacher assessment expert), Raquel Villaseca (of Peru), Ruth Saez, and Ana Teberosky. The NGO officials interviewed each affirmed the names of national and international organizations listed in the interview questions. National sources of information mentioned more than once included INAFOCAM, the ministry of education itself, and the National Office of Statistics (ONE); no international organizations were proactively mentioned as most relevant to this stakeholder group. Key national individuals seen as experts or conduits of literacy information that were mentioned more than once include Liliana Montenegro, Dinorah de Lima, and Ancell Schecker.

Amongst the donors interviewed, national sources of information mentioned more than once included the ministry of education itself and ONE. Many international sources (those mentioned in the interview questions) were affirmed as important sources, including USAID,

IDB, UNICEF, OEI, and the World Bank. The key individual seen as an expert or conduit of literacy information that was mentioned more than once was Ancell Schecker. No journals or specialty publications were proactively mentioned, but all donor interviewees noted the importance of Google Scholar.

Of the two union officials interviewed, one proactively mentioned Centro Poveda and the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (UASD) as the two key national organizations or institutions they considered as the most reliable sources of literacy information. They did not proactively mention any specific individuals, or any international sources, nor did they recognize the literacy database of the LAC Reads Capacity Program.

Understanding. Upon being asked about their views on the state of early literacy in the Dominican Republic, 100% of participants replied that the state of early literacy was negative. Whereas government officials painted a slightly rosier picture of the trend and actions being taken, the other groups outlined a consistently dire scenario and did not suggest the status quo was likely to catalyze significant improvement. Twenty of the 22 interviews indicated that low teacher quality was the most the direct cause of reading ills in the country, a point supported by other objective examinations of the teaching profession in the Dominican Republic (Educa, 2015). The two union respondents did not mention teacher quality, but rather low investment and poor policies. Most of the 22 respondents affirmed their awareness of the negative state of early literacy through personal or direct knowledge or interaction with the education system, with four of the five groups naming multiple sources of knowledge, while one group (teacher organizations) named only direct interactions with teachers and schools. One government official suggested that the principal cause of low teacher quality was that "teachers were not teaching literacy the way that they were trained in pre-service training," suggesting that some of the blame

lies with teachers themselves. Another government official, however, noted that "teachers are not given coherent evidence-based information on how to teach literacy, so they default to teaching how they themselves were taught."

Perceptions of agreement around best-practice literacy instruction, or even status quo literacy instruction, varied widely according to the data. Awareness or understanding of research not in line with or supportive of particular approaches to literacy instruction was notably limited in several interviews with government and NGO officials, while donors and academics were more aware of disagreements around literacy instruction as well as methodological considerations in research that attempts to vet learning outcomes. Overall, a slight majority (eight of 15) of interview respondents that commented explicitly on the subject suggested that there is relative agreement across the government and civil society around what constitutes best-practice literacy instruction. Probing on this perception, however, revealed different perspectives on this agreement. One academic respondent suggested that "the ministry basically controls the discussion, and has not engaged with constructive dissent on the subject of the communicative approach (to literacy instruction)." One donor respondent expressed dismay at this dynamic, describing the perception of official consensus on literacy instruction and the undercurrent of academic debate on the topic as a "steady state of cognitive dissonance."

Along similar lines, perceptions of the country's culture of research likely have impacted the degree of internalization of educational research, if not technical understanding. As the Weiss "enlightenment" model suggests, an entrenched collection of research leading to similar conclusions (as opposed to just one or several papers) can serve to shift opinion or policy paradigms. Although the literature review demonstrated that much of the global community engaged with research on early literacy is in relative agreement with approaches that prioritize or

at least include phonics, the interview data makes it clear that this is not the case in the Dominican Republic. Part of this, as noted, is an access issue; not all stakeholders are steeped in the global body of research. However, the interview data suggests that simply making that body of research accessible would not necessarily change the minds of stakeholders with a lifetime of personal experience in education or a belief in trusted researchers and thought leaders that promote a rigid approach to literacy instruction based the "whole language" concept. Though not made explicit by any respondents, the personal and accumulated experiences that respondents said had shaped their worldviews on literacy and related research made their perspectives unlikely to change in the face of new research. This indicates to me that the lack of a normed culture of research of education and other social sciences in the Dominican Republic makes the terrain very challenging for evidence-based discussion. Objectivity in research is not clearly identifiable, nor easily trusted, and the reputation or connectedness of certain institutions or individuals can clearly trump robustness of methods or replicability of research.

As noted earlier, part of gaining insight into respondent understanding of research includes data about their personal and professional preferences for research consumption. In relation to the respondents' preferences for literature or materials related to early literacy that are most useful to them for their work, the instrument was not as effective as intended at eliciting frank and specific examples of the user experience with literacy research and evidence. Part of the problem may have had to do with the abstract nature of the questions asked of respondents as well as the lack of a specific frame of reference; most respondents were unable or unwilling to name a specific source of research that they considered either particularly well done or particularly unconvincing. In fact, one union respondent, upon being asked to think of an example of a poorly written report on literacy they had seen, replied quickly that they "wouldn't

dare to criticize anyone's work." This reply intimated a diplomatic inclination that may not actually fully reflect their beliefs, based upon their replies to other questions around the culture of research in the country which suggested that research is judged, critiqued, or disregarded quite often, but not in a public or collective manner.

That said, the data set did include a large amount of information on generalized research preferences. Government respondents, for example, consistently noted the importance of technical documents that are rich in content but also practical and accessible for teachers; overly technical documents that are not easily understood by classroom teachers with little time or training in methods were noted as not particularly helpful for their work. One government respondent, for example, noted that literature or data was most useful in cases where it could help inform particular didactic strategies being imparted to teachers in training. Noted examples included the reading activity guides produced by Poveda and PUCMM that were accessible to teachers and trainers alike. Another government respondent noted that they looked for "timely information" based on the needs at hand. The same government respondent, given their facility with research databases online, felt comfortable looking for research on the internet.

Other comments, particularly from the government and NGO respondents, suggested a preference for research that, as one respondent noted, "assumes a broad conceptualization of literacy as something beyond just learning sounds and characters." With probes and follow up in some cases, I interpreted the several comments similar to this one to be a diplomatic way of expressing a preference for research steeped in the communicative approach to teaching literacy, and a way of expressing a possible aversion to literature steeped in purely phonics or syllabic approach to teaching literacy. Yet others expressed this preference in other ways; one respondent noted that helpful literature accounts for the "role of literacy in the home and community, not

just the school setting."

By contrast, the preference for literacy instruction approach did not come up in relation to research preferences in the interviews with academics or union leaders. In the case of the donors interviewed, I detected some veiled or coded language intimating a preference for research that "is in line with international standards," which I interpreted as referring to alignment with either a global or mixed approach, or one at least inclusive of phonics.

As noted in Chapter 3 on the instrument design, another way I attempted to gain insight into the levels of understanding of literacy research was to better understand the preferences of researchers related to research consumption. Questions 6 through 8 of the interview utilized a Likert scale whereby respondents were asked to rate their preferences for literacy research on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being least important, 5 being most important). Table 5, below, reviews preferences around certain fundamental characteristics of research on literacy that respondents use in their job. Table 6 lays out preferences, using the same Likert scale (1 being least useful, 5 being most useful) of select academic disciplines from which literacy-relevant research may be drawn. In Tables 5 and 6, the average Likert scale scores are listed, and then the averages are disaggregated by stakeholder type. I consider both tables to have some crossover relevance to the question of utility as well as understanding, but the data are reviewed here as pertinent to the ways that stakeholders fit information into their own framework of understanding.

Table 5

Preferred Characteristics of Usable Evidence or Research on Literacy (Likert Scale: 1-5)

	(a) Clear methods.	(b) Quant. meth.	(c) Qual meth.	(d) Local or national source	(e) Foreign source	(f) Respect author	(g) Reputable source org.	(h) Done in Span.	(i) Has exec. sum.	(j) New learning	(k) Validates held belief
MEAN	**4.86**	**3.00**	**3.57**	**3.15**	**2.80**	**3.81**	**4.62**	**4.05**	**4.30**	**4.62**	**2.80**
G1 (Gov)	4.67	2.83	4.17	3.50	3.00	4.00	5.00	3.83	4.80	4.50	3.80
G2 (Acad)	5.00	2.60	2.60	1.75	2.25	2.80	4.00	3.20	3.80	4.60	2.40
G3 (NGO)	4.75	3.25	3.50	3.00	2.25	3.75	4.25	4.50	3.75	4.25	1.75
G4 (Donor)	5.00	3.75	3.50	3.50	3.75	4.75	5.00	4.50	4.50	5.00	2.75
G5 (Union)	5.00	2.50	4.50	4.50	2.50	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	3.50

Note. Elaborated by author.

Table 6

Attitudes Towards Relevance of Disciplines to Literacy Improvement (Likert Scale: 1-5)

	Neuroscience	Economics	Sociology	Anthropology	Psychology	Education
MEAN	**3.52**	**3.19**	**4.57**	**3.69**	**4.29**	**4.67**
G1 (Gov)	3.50	3.17	4.67	3.50	4.50	4.67
G2 (Acad)	3.80	2.80	4.20	3.67	4.40	4.80
G3 (NGO)	2.25	3.25	4.50	4.00	3.50	4.75
G4 (Donor)	3.75	4.25	4.75	4.00	4.50	4.25
G5 (Union)	5.00	2.00	5.00	3.00	4.50	5.00

Note. Elaborated by author.

Table 5 reveals that nearly all respondents strongly endorsed the relative importance of a "reputable institution" regarding the source of research, but this did not necessarily reflect the

importance of knowing and respecting the authors themselves. There was an attempt, apparently, to decouple or diminish the personal aspect of research production, but institutional reputation remained relevant. This finding is somewhat counterintuitive and surprising given the perceived premium of personal relationships that prior literature identified. For example, one respondent explained that "there is tendency to view expert opinion as infallible" and that "there is sometimes a lot of defensiveness when research is used to criticize current practices."

Preference for Spanish language availability may fall predictably along relative lines of bilingualism and socio-economic status. Some respondents noted that they spoke or read English but felt it useful for others if the pertinent materials were available in Spanish. Expressions on the value of executive summaries followed similar lines, though academics and NGO interviewees showed less interest in executive summaries.

Table 6 shows the attitudes that respondents have towards the relevance of various academic disciplines to literacy improvement. Because only short, pithy descriptions of these disciplines were provided as examples, it is not easy to read very deeply into the data presented in this table. It is clear that educational research, which I illustratively described to respondents as based on pedagogical or school management considerations, was described as the most relevant by all stakeholder groups, while economics was described as the least useful. Sociology also received a very high ranking across the board, as it was explained by one respondent that there is a strong tradition of sociological approaches to education in the country and to the highly socialized, even politicized, activity of learning to read.

The general consensus on disciplines useful to literacy improvement was that to the extent to which data is borne out of or directly relevant to the classroom-based teaching and learning experience, the more useful it was. Some notable exceptions to that sentiment were

expressed by some donors and NGO officials who felt that a more data-driven and broad perspective on the sector as it relates to the output indicators of literacy is the most useful for the enterprises they undertake, such as intervention planning and sector reports.

Government officials interviewed demonstrated the least interest in a clear, transparent methodology section. Ministry of education stakeholders, in particular, discussed a preference for "on the ground" information (which was explained as information gleaned from schools or educators in direct service) as opposed to research rigor. This, combined with the highest degree of preference for research that "validates something in which you believe," suggests an affinity for the "political" or "tactical" models that Weiss describes. Given the grounded interest expressed, government officials also indicated the high usefulness of research from other countries (second only to the indication of international donors). More than one government official noted the utility of donor-commissioned or foreign university research, and one commented that "if it comes from countries with similar contexts, we're open to it."

Academics conveyed little to no bias towards research methodologies, and in interviews with them I wondered if perhaps some academics may have felt obliged to convey no bias towards methodologies given their professional identities. More than other groups, they were inclined to give responses which were most clearly in line with Weiss's "knowledge-driven" or "problem-solving" models, wherein the empirical process takes precedence over other considerations.

NGO officials' research preferences put them in the median range for all groups, with two exceptions: they were the least compelled by research or evidence from other countries, and the least interested in research that offered new learning (though still rated it 4.25 of 5). NGO officials didn't see much utility at all for psychology or neuroscience, rating these disciplines the

lowest of any stakeholder group, and they rated educational research the most useful nearly unanimously. One NGO official that noted their firm belief in the importance and relevance of educational research also confided that it habitually suffered from overly-narrative structures, or what they described as "blah blah blah."

Donors, perhaps more than other groups, demonstrated a preference for verifiable evidence that supports new or innovative learning, based on rigorously produced data from reputable sources. They showed the highest interest, by far, in economic research, and the lowest interest in traditional educational research.

Both union officials interviewed seemed to trust teachers' experiences above other sorts of written evidence or research. They expressed the lowest preference for evidence produced with quantitative methodologies and the highest preferences for qualitative methodologies. Surprisingly, they both rated their interest in neuroscience as "most useful" and upon being asked about this, they both seemed to suggest that this was part and parcel of psychology. Neither had noted interest in research or researchers from the field of neuroscience in earlier questions about preferences.

Utilization. As noted in Chapter 3, interpreting the meaningful ways that individuals utilize information on literacy was a difficult task. My own construct of "utilization" or "use" was not as consistently clear to all individuals as I had originally hoped, though at least some correlation between apparent clarity and stakeholder type was evident; my construct of utilization seemed least clear to union respondents and several government and NGO respondents, and it seemed most clear to academics and donors. Table 7 (below) reviews the attitudes towards utility of research from question 7 in the instrument, which were based on select Weiss models of research utilization. The design of question 7 in the instrument may have

resulted in a somewhat transparent, if not clumsy, attempt to gauge affinity for Weiss's models (resulting in some threats to construct validity, as noted in Chapter 3). Numerous respondents, particularly academic and NGO officials, may have responded to demand characteristics of the probes that led them to answer in a manner they may have felt to be most empirically correct. Still, respondents from unions and government were more open about their affinity for and the utility of research which affirms their beliefs. Concurrently, most of the respondents from the other groups were inclined to agree with the importance of research designed to answer unanswered questions, which directly correlates to Weiss's "knowledge-driven" model, or the NRCPP "change-inducing" approach.

The government and union respondents that had expressed the highest preferences for research that validates their own beliefs also saw research as not necessarily the most important part of educational decision making, and they were still inclined to agree with the idea that research should be focused on answering unanswered questions, regardless of the answer (a feature of Weiss's knowledge-driven model). Regarding the importance of one's own institutions producing or commissioning research, most saw this question as anathema to what might be considered correct under the knowledge-driven model, and they discussed their openness to any relevant piece of research. However, government officials and donors were most interested in their own organization's research and evidence base, noting that this is what they are most used to accessing and that its commissioning was usually the most direct and relevant handling of literacy or education issues that they most often confront in their own work.

Table 7

Attitudes Towards Utility of Research (Likert Scale: 1-5)

	(a) Educational research is most useful if it validates or supports an initiative from my organization.	(b) Educational research is most useful if it helps answer a difficult question to which I do not have a response.	(c) Educational research is only one part of a complex process in educational decision making, not necessarily the most important.	(d) Educational research is more useful to me if my organization produced it.
MEAN	**2.10**	**4.48**	**3.29**	**2.05**
G1 (Gov)	3.00	4.50	4.33	2.67
G2 (Acad)	1.60	4.60	2.40	1.60
G3 (NGO)	1.50	4.00	4.00	1.25
G4 (Donor)	2.00	5.00	2.50	2.50
G5 (Union)	2.00	4.00	2.50	2.00

Note. Elaborated by author.

Across a majority of all those interviewed, it was clear that the "method" or "approach" to teaching reading was a sensitive topic, and broaching this topic created a slight mood shift in several of the interviews, as evidenced by body language and tone. In response to the question of whether there was more agreement or disagreement around how reading should be taught, seven of the 22 respondents suggested that they felt that there was more agreement. When I probed responses to this question, those who felt there was more agreement generally based this answer on the fact that the ministry of education had an embedded point of view on this topic, and that this point of view was reflected by the *enfoque comunicativo*.

The majority (about two-thirds) responded that there was not clear agreement in practice, and that national-level discussions about how literacy is taught in the country were at least in part influenced by ideological considerations, and not often influenced by valid or appropriate uses of

evidence. One senior government official even confided that while there is a clear ministry of education position on the validity and use of the communicative approach for primary teachers, that position is often a theoretical one, and that "in practice, that theory is often lost," and "there is a famous book in the country called *Nacho* which has been sold at traffic stops for dozens of years and is still the hidden but true curriculum of primary school teachers."

Several respondents from the NGO and donor community suggested that the discussions around methods for teaching early literacy were mostly occurring at higher or disconnected levels, resulting in a policy debate detached from classroom and teacher practice. One NGO official described a disconnect between ministry officials and public schools, arguing that there is "not so much an issue of agreement or disagreement, but rather a gap in knowledge and experience between those in the highest positions at MINERD and the primary school teachers, which is at the root of what can seem like resistance to new [approaches]," adding that she found it "very problematic that many of those in MINERD who are making key decisions about curriculum, professional development, and literacy improvement in general are themselves products of public schools and have limited real-life experiences with the communities, teachers and students that the public schools serve."

Two others noted that rather than characterizing perspectives on literacy teaching methods as in agreement or disagreement with each other, it was more appropriate to frame the issue as a dynamic amongst gradations of ignorance on the topic. Donors, on the other hand, nearly all noted that there was agreement within the ministry and among the ministry's core supporters, but that some academics and others in the country (and outside) were in disagreement. These donors discussed the ongoing presentation of evidence that suggests a "balanced" approach (combining both elements of a communicative approach and a decoding-

focused syllabic approach) would be more effective, and that the effort to crack the perceived consensus among ministry officials had waxed and waned over the years, but that new ministry officials might be more open than before to reexamining literacy instruction approaches.

A key follow-up question that I asked was "how did you form this opinion or understanding" about the state of literacy teaching in the country, as the nature of this interview was less about diagnosing the education system's ills than understanding how key stakeholders make sense of them of them. Table 8 (below) summarizes what I assessed to be the predominant answer type (half of a stakeholder group or more) given by respondents to the direct question of whether there exists more widespread agreement or disagreement on the approach to teaching literacy in the Dominican Republic. There was some heterogeneity of answers within group types, but the predominant themes in all of them were that opinions were formed about the state of agreement or disagreement either through first-hand knowledge or written reports.

In respondent feedback from government officials, NGOs, and unions, a premium was placed on the value of first-hand knowledge related the state of early literacy in the country. Amongst the academics, NGO officials, and donors, most respondents signified that a fundamental disagreement about literacy instruction existed amongst those influential in literacy, while government and union officials tended to signify wider agreement.

Table 8

Summary of Understanding about Consensus on Literacy Instruction Approaches

Key Stakeholder Group	Understanding	Basis
Dominican Government	Agreement	First-hand knowledge
Dominican Academia	Disagreement	Reports
Dominican NGOs	Disagreement	First-hand knowledge
Donor Organizations	Disagreement	Reports
Dominican Teacher Unions	Agreement	First-hand knowledge

Note. Elaborated by author.

As discussed earlier, one objective of this research project was to be able to ascribe to different stakeholder types one or more of the Weiss utilization models. Table 9 (below) presents a summary of what I ultimately deemed the two predominant models per group based on their interview responses. Assignment of these model types corresponded closely with the preponderance of responses given to questions 6 and 7 in the instrument, which asked direct questions about affinity for defining characteristics of relevant Weiss model types. With that in mind, there was ample room for interpretation of the answers given by respondents as well as how they relate to Weiss's utilization models. Table 9 and the accompanying narrative are presented with the caveat that not all respondents clearly or fully ascribe to these models. Moreover, and as noted in Chapter 3, it is likely that the limited sample size does not allow for broad generalization.

After carefully considering the Weiss model types ascribed to the stakeholder groups, however, I have confidence that these assignments both adequately represent predominant themes in the interviews I conducted as well as reflect what knowledgeable Dominican education

stakeholders perceive about each other. It does bear repeating here that assignment of model types, as Weiss would surely agree, is neither pejorative nor celebratory. Not one of these models is objectively preferable over another, but there is value in assignment of model types to stakeholder groups insofar as it serves as a discussion point for both self-reflection and broader informed dialogue within the sectors. Because different stakeholders have different uses for research they are at times at odds with each other regarding how research is to be understood and utilized. As a result, and as the data collected here implies, different stakeholders have trouble talking to one another, consensus is difficult to build, and informed dialogue is elusive. Using the Weiss model types to analyze the results from interviews with various stakeholder groups helps find a common ground in their views on educational policy shortcomings, and will allow USAID or others to work towards solutions that benefit multiple or even all groups by incorporating this information into the design, production, and dissemination efforts of relevant research and related information products.

Table 9

Summary of Predominant Weiss Model Types by Stakeholder Group

Key Stakeholder Group	Weiss Model Types
Dominican Government	Political, Tactical
Dominican Academia	Problem Solving, Enlightenment
Dominican NGOs	Interactive, Tactical
Donor Organizations	Problem Solving, Interactive
Dominican Teacher Unions	Political, Tactical

Note. Elaborated by author.

The collective of answers given by government officials showed an overall connection to Weiss's political and tactical models of utilization. The political model, which features preconceived notions seeking ex-post affirmation through research aligned with these notions, was the most in synch with the overall response types given by the government officials interviewed. The tactical model, which features deflection of policy criticism and allying with reputable researchers or institutions, was also apparent in the response types given by ministry of education officials.

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that a large number of ministry offices and individuals have a hand in early literacy issues, even more than the eight units initially targeted. Not only does literacy instruction cut across at least six departments of the same ministry, but interviews with both ministry of education officials and others outside the ministry suggest that at least some of the relevant units at the ministry itself may be disconnected from channels of access, the practicalities of the country's teacher training systems, and the realities of classrooms. One commenter noted that, for a centralized education system with a single national language, the degree to which "any one individual in the education system can integrate reliable or new information into policy formation relevant to literacy is actually quite limited."

Academics, overall, provided responses in the interviews that most closely aligned to the problem-solving and enlightenment models. This was in some ways to be expected, as these models are characterized by interest in the research process for addressing open questions in a collective body of knowledge. It is likely that some academic respondents displayed demand characteristics more than other stakeholders; that is, they may have responded to some of the questions in my interviews with their role as academics front of mind and been inclined to answer in ways that showed their relationship with research as deeply rooted and of primary

importance to their world view on education and literacy. Nonetheless, it was at least slightly surprising to me that aspects of the knowledge-driven model, characterized by an empirical adherence to research findings, were not more prominent in responses. It struck me that academics were aware of the socially constructed nature of research understanding and use in early literacy in the country, and as such, tempered their answers that prioritized empirical approaches with consistent nods to the importance of contextualization. Academics were, by far, the group most familiar with a range of research sources, methods, and findings on early literacy in the country and internationally.

NGO officials, overall, provided responses in the interviews that most closely aligned to the interactive and tactical models. They expressed high value for a non-bureaucratic connection to the field and to teachers. As such, in some cases they discounted the value of research in the collective endeavor of improving early literacy. NGO officials were strongly in agreement with the notion that research is only part of the policy decision process. In contrast, NGO officials were in strong disagreement with the notion that research is most useful when it validates their own beliefs or is commissioned by their own organizations. The latter two responses may have some demand characteristics, but may also be reflective of individuals less compelled by data and more compelled by personal experience with or within schools. Part of this might be explained by the fact that education research in general, and literacy research in particular, is not often associated with clear instructions to policy makers or educators. While there is clear evidence across disciplines and contexts that phonics-based instruction should at least be a part of early reading instruction, for example, this fact doesn't necessarily indicate to decision makers at any level what kind of policy to implement, how feasible or realistic it will be to implement, or how teachers themselves will be managed or supported to follow through on that policy.

Donor officials, overall, provided responses in the interviews that most closely aligned to the problem-solving and interactive models. They, much more than the other groups, prioritized the use of research to answer vexing questions about literacy and education writ large in the country. They also saw research as the central element in education policy formulation and were not inclined to agree with the statement that research is only one element amongst many important ones. At least two donor respondents vociferously disagreed with this comment, as it appeared to strike a chord with their frustrations on the state of evidence-based decision making in the country. Even some aspects of the more positivist knowledge-driven model were apparent in some of the answers by some of the donor respondents; this included two separate comments from individuals expressing frustration that aspects of certain "gold standard" research reports on literacy were not taken more seriously by Dominican decision makers.

The union representatives provided responses in the interviews that most closely aligned to the political and tactical models, expressing somewhat similar views to those of government officials. Both respondents were open about the fact that literacy issues, per se, were not a top priority for their work as it related to teacher advocacy, though both approached the relevance from the standpoint of teacher training. Their answers to questions about research utilization, on the one hand, indicated an affinity for the interactive model insofar as their ratings showed relative appreciation for the primacy of research in policy (more so than the government officials). On the other hand, and after probes to their Likert scale rating, their responses suggested the low overall utility of research in general, and an inclination towards research that could be useful in furthering their advocacy and policy goals.

Summary

Overall, the findings from the interview data present a picture of a committed and

experienced cadre of education professionals in the Dominican Republic working on literacy improvement in their respective sectors. There is widespread agreement that early literacy is not being learned or taught in optimal ways. There are some common fora for sharing information, research, and feedback loops across stakeholder groups and a picture of overall collegiality in the sector around early literacy improvement emerges from the data. While the sample of stakeholder groups was small, the saturation of data helped to construct a picture of some degree of homogeneity within stakeholder groups around certain questions related to access, understanding, and utilization, though not across all of them.

It is also clear that each of the five stakeholder groups exhibit distinct characteristics in the way that they engage with research in general, and specifically on that related to literacy. While some of the stakeholder groups exhibit similarities in research preferences that illuminate questions on their understanding, very few common points of access for research or data exists across stakeholder groups, making access to reliable or consistent information a challenge. The same can be said for the way that research informs the professional activities related to literacy improvement of the different stakeholder groups. Assignation of Weiss research utilization model types based upon the kinds of responses stakeholders provided in the interviews helps to illuminate these differences and can also help pave the way for more informed dialogue with and among key stakeholders. The lack of a robust culture of research described by most respondents helps account for disparities in what both specific and collective research are understood to support around effective early literacy instruction.

There is clearly widespread frustration with both the state of early literacy, the degree to which research informs early literacy instruction, and the overall quality of research production and utilization in the country. Addressing these three gaps is clearly challenging, but will be

important to do in any endeavor designed to improve the decision-making around early literacy policy in the country. In the next and final chapter, I synthesize the findings from this chapter into broader conclusions, as well as offer recommendations for addressing some of these clear challenges to effective research utilization in the collective effort to optimize evidence-based decision making related to literacy improvement in the country's public schools.

Chapter 5: Policy Discussion

In this chapter, I synthesize the most salient findings from Chapter 4, including their ties with the most relevant elements of the literature review from Chapter 3 and the contextual factors outlined in Chapter 1, into conclusions and recommendations. I organize this chapter by first presenting overarching conclusions stemming from the findings in Chapter 4, followed by key conclusions related to access, understanding, and utilization. Finally, I lay out a set of recommendations for further action and research. The first set of recommendations is geared towards the actions of key stakeholders in the Dominican Republic. The second set of recommendations is for USAID, other donors, and producers of research on early literacy. The third set of recommendations is for the conduct of future research on knowledge utilization around educational research in general, and early literacy research in particular.

Conclusions

Before addressing the conclusions related specifically to access, understanding, and utilization of literacy research, I first address a number of overarching conclusions about literacy and research in the Dominican Republic that can be drawn from the data. First, there is clear evidence of total consensus among key stakeholders in the Dominican Republic that early literacy is a major challenge to the success of the education system. It is also clear that there is wide agreement that a significant pain point for the improvement of literacy outcomes is teacher training and teacher performance in the classroom. Third, there is agreement, if not full consensus, that teachers are not well supported under current structures and are largely left to their own devices when it comes to ascertaining how they will teach their students to learn to read. Most stakeholders agree that centralized policy, research, and resources are either inadequate or do not adequately reach the classroom level. The interviewed stakeholders also

agree that there has been, to date, insufficient measurement, both formative and evaluative, of early literacy levels in schools.

It is also apparent that despite the literature suggesting the poor reputation of educational research, all key stakeholders in the Dominican Republic consider educational research as the most influential discipline as it pertains to the evidence base on early literacy. At the same time, there is widespread agreement, if not full consensus, that the culture of research in the Dominican Republic, despite some modest improvements, does not adequately facilitate the proliferation, understanding, and use of research on literacy in optimal ways. This is contrasted with the finding that the most important aspect of educational research for all groups is to answer questions for which they do not have a response (Table 7). This conclusion is manifest in numerous educational settings in the country, but perhaps of most relevance to this paper is the generation of confusion that available research on literacy (or lack thereof) causes. If there is confusion among the teaching ranks about literacy instruction, as many stakeholders clearly agree, there is certainly confusion among key stakeholders about what is occurring in classrooms, how teachers are actually prepared, and what the entirety of global evidence has to say about optimal early literacy instruction.

The usefulness of a social constructivist framework and several constructs from behavioral economics was apparent insofar as it helped facilitate a rich discussion with respondents about their own professional experiences. The contextualization of the research within knowledge utilization literature also proved meaningful, as it helped inform the data coding as well synthesize the findings. Ultimately distilling the interview data on knowledge utilization from stakeholders into Weiss model types for how they use research related to literacy improvement helped affirm some, though not all, findings and served as one of the more

compelling exercises for considering the demand for research use by actors with real-world interests and approaches to utilizing research for their professional objectives. As Weiss and others have argued, because different stakeholders have different uses for research, they are at times at odds with each other regarding how research is to be understood and utilized (Hood, 2002; Weiss, 1978). As noted, different stakeholders do not communicate well with each other, consensus is difficult to build or measure, and interventions by international donors or researchers can be fleeting and illusory. Within this context, the model types are something to be understood, not necessarily challenged or changed (even if that were to be possible). Given what we know about entrenched interests and incentives, the Weiss model types describe the baked-in, back end of the research to practice value chain, and represent the very real and "rational" (in economic terms) managing interests of stakeholders, as outlined by Datta and Mullainathan (2014).

Access. The data backs up the Educa (2015) findings that demonstrate a niche cadre of organizations with interest and influence in early literacy improvement. In considering the demand side of the demand/supply dynamic of research on early literacy, one conclusion I draw is that different stakeholders, even among the same group types, vary quite a bit in their individual channels of access to research and evidence, which greatly impacts the type of information they receive and seek out. Not only is there no clear consensus on the source of good research, but no other trusted source of information on literacy was mentioned more than the daily newspaper of record, the *Listin Diario*. However, there is clear awareness and even appreciation of the wider world of literature bases, including from outside of the country and from non-education disciplines.

Applying the "Informed Dialogue" approach, it is evident that the groundwork has been

laid for a richer, more inclusive national discussion on literacy improvement. There is clearly work to be done, however, to optimize it. As it relates to access, the data shows an apparent bottleneck at the point of defining and enabling the flow of information and discussion related to policy formulation (the third of nine criteria). It is not clear, however, that external or international programs such as the LRCP are set up in ways to efficiently bridge this gap. The bottleneck is characterized by self-imposed positions of siloing amongst key stakeholders and aversion to sources and types of information that do not conform to preferences.

Understanding. The research findings present evidence that, across stakeholders, there is both incomplete and inconsistent understanding about the breadth and depth of what the literature base on early literacy has to say about early literacy instruction, both that from within the country and beyond. As noted in Chapter 4, however, and to the degree that research on early literacy permeates the key stakeholder institutions of the Dominican Republic, there is, on the whole, evidence of a high degree of understanding of that specific research amongst key stakeholders. There is a demonstrated understanding of the core findings and relevance of research on literacy as well as, in general, a high degree of appreciation for methods and types of validity in the consumption of research. This breaks down at some point, however, in the value chain of research to policy implementation. In keeping with De Lima (2013) and Educa (2015), this research affirms that there is a major gap between research-informed policy discussions and the implementation of literacy improvement interventions on the whole. Part of this breakdown may be explained by evidence from the findings in Chapter 4 which suggest that awareness or understanding of research not in line with or supportive of particular approaches to literacy instruction is limited. Jabbar's (2011) explanation of framing effects of research and researchers within certain stakeholder circles may help account for cognitive biases in favor of or against

certain types of research. Applying the "Informed Dialogue" approach, shared understanding of research clearly a hits bottleneck at the point of "establishing rules of knowledge-based dialogue" (criterion 6 of 9). The variation in Weiss type models across stakeholders demonstrate that not everyone is at the same starting point, and the findings in Chapter 4 demonstrate that a clear, collective cognitive dissonance remains entrenched around actual, widely-supported, and evidence-based early literacy instruction in the country.

Utilization. This research yielded some relevant insights into research use characteristics, including insights into the motivations and interests of different stakeholders. That said, it is very difficult to draw concrete conclusions about the complex nature of personal decisions that impact the way research affects literacy improvement efforts in the Dominican Republic. One of the reasons this may be the case is because of inadequate construct validity around the term "utilization." What some stakeholders deemed utilization was different from how others understood the term, and ultimately inconsistent with my own broad definition, derived from the literature cited in Chapter 2. The literature cited on behavioral economics helps to situate some of the findings that show how different stakeholders react rationally and in situations of imperfect information flow. Likewise, Weiss's models of knowledge utilization helped to tease out how key stakeholders interact with research in ways that may both predetermine the ways that they seek out research as well as the ways in which they use it.

One significant conclusion I draw on utilization is the apparent alignment of thought between unions and government on literacy (both politically and tactically as well as experiential, rather than research-focused in forming opinions), as shown by similar results between the groups in data from Tables 5 and 9.

This conclusion might be counterintuitive in some country contexts, but it may not be altogether surprising in the Dominican Republic. First, there is a connection between the leadership of both the teachers union and the ministry of education, including several former union leaders rising to high positions at the ministry of education over the past 20 years. Officials from both groups demonstrated a preference for robust research methods used in research on literacy, but they also shared comments that revealed a relative disinterest in, if not disdain for, the strictures of a problem-solving or interactive model. This is an important conclusion because, amongst the five stakeholder groups, government and unions represent the lion's share of decision makers (as opposed to decision informers) related to literacy improvement.

Research utilization tactics of both ministry officials and union representatives may be characterized by the political and tactical models, and their interview responses also resonated with some of Jabbar's (2011) behavioral economics concepts. One example is status quo bias, whereby any changes are perceived by stakeholders as a loss. This was evident in the discussions around resistance to change over the years at the ministry of education despite advocacy from within and outside of the government to reexamine literacy instruction in the light of new and global evidence. Another example is the paradox of choice, whereby a plethora of policy options based on research can actually cause anxiety or confusion rather than improve decision making. This was apparent in the ways both groups' worldviews on research utilization were characterized. Once again, it is important to note that this is an entirely rational mode of operation, given the state of the research to practice gap in education, the extant culture of research, and imbedded incentives structures within both the ministry and union work spaces.

Recommendations

For Dominican literacy stakeholders: Although this paper and the research conducted was meant primarily to inform USAID research dissemination efforts, some obvious recommendations for Dominican literacy stakeholders can be drawn out of the findings and conclusions. Such recommendations could potentially be addressed by outside actors in some ways, but each of the following recommendations that flow from the findings and conclusions are best addressed principally by the stakeholders with agency and ownership over the national discourse on literacy improvement and the Dominican education sector in general.

1) Elevate early literacy improvement to a shared national cause**.** Despite evidence that most stakeholders see literacy as a major educational challenge and rank it among the highest educational priorities in the country, organized efforts to raise the issue to a national cause (such as the 4% movement related to the education budget) have not been and still are not in place. The country has made significant improvements in each administration of the UNESCO comparative tests in third and sixth grade reading, but it is still stuck with the worst measured early reading scores in the region. The 10-year National Educational Pact from 2014 contains no evidence-based plan for early literacy improvement, and the revised curriculum does not address the gaps in teaching proficiency of early literacy. There is an opportunity to update or to further clarify this plan as it approaches its midterm as it relates to early literacy. Efforts should be made to shore up sector-wide agreements on the keys to an evidence-based policy framework around the shared goal of literacy improvement in the country.

2) Build the basis for Informed Dialogue. Above all else, the framework that Reimers and McGinn (1997) established for creating productive education policy dialogues in complex circumstances prioritizes open but systematized communication, something that has been hard to

establish in the Dominican Republic with respect to early literacy. Conferences, workshops, and seminars abound in the hotel conference rooms of Santo Domingo, paid for by various NGOs, donors, or government agencies, but they too often resemble echo chambers as opposed to spaces for meaningful interchange and learning. Some of the Informed Dialogue criteria have been met; a definition of stakeholders and increased empowerment of them has arguably occurred, but as noted previously, several steps are missing. The interview data shows that there is no clear definition of what dialogues go on and should go on amongst policy stakeholders, nor is there an establishment of rules for knowledge-based dialogue. That represents a critical bottleneck in the informed dialogue continuum, and it helps explain why policy, practice, and stakeholder perspectives are described as disjointed. Addressing these gaps requires an infusion of new perspectives and, ideally, a new generation of skilled education professionals. Participation in the newly formed RedLEI, a regional network for early literacy research production and promotion,) may be one way to help inform and shape the literacy community of practice, though it must interact with other networks like the Latin American chapter of the International Literacy Association (ILA), as well as national networks around literacy improvement.

3) Align curriculum on literacy with related pre-service teacher training. Another key step in integrating an evidence-based approach to early literacy policy in the Dominican Republic is the alignment of the MINERD primary education curriculum with a standardized post-secondary and university curriculum for teacher training. Moreover, follow-up is needed to ensure that implementation of a coherent, evidence-based early literacy instruction strategy is occurring in primary school classrooms. De Lima (2013) made a similar recommendation, but such follow-up is difficult to coordinate in the context of a disjointed literacy policy framework. Furthermore, as suggested through several interviews, technical staff from the MINERD would

need specialized training on classroom observation and school assessment to ascertain implementation of best practices at the school level. One possible way to address this is through the creation of a virtual portal where educators and classroom teachers can share useful research and related resources that could help them in real time to prepare their lessons and classroom contexts. This is supported by the finding that most stakeholders value information drawn for experience with school environments. An example of this already occurred in Guatemala, with the Online Learning Initiative (OLI), which utilizes a user-friendly wiki to break down the component parts of the Guatemalan curriculum into lesson plans and uploaded resources for each.

For USAID and others interested in more effectively disseminating literacy research: The principal aim of this research was to understand how key stakeholders access, understand, and utilize research related to literacy in the Dominican Republic in order to inform ongoing efforts to more effectively produce, systematize, and disseminate relevant information in the service of improving low literacy outcomes. With that in mind, the following five core recommendations most clearly emanate from the findings and conclusions of the data collected through stakeholder interviews.

1) Factor in stakeholder perspectives in research production and dissemination efforts. Taken as a whole, the data presented in Chapter 4 make it clear that many stakeholders find the value chain in the literacy research to practice continuum is not optimized. If this is to change, the onus lies with donors, researchers, and research disseminators as much as it lies with key stakeholders involved in the formulation of the literacy policy framework in the country. Key stakeholder mapping, including an understanding of how stakeholders access, understand, and utilize research and evidence, should become a standard part of any concerted dissemination

effort. As shown in my research, this helps to identify both differences and similarities among stakeholder groups, which is imperative for moving forward to improve the relevance of educational research.

In cases where that is not cost effective or where smaller, ad hoc research dissemination efforts are undertaken, basic attempts to identify and understand the knowledge utilization practices of targeted audiences should accompany the research to practice continuum as early and as consistently as possible.

2) Customize research production and dissemination approaches for targeted audiences. This recommendation is not necessarily novel, but it is something that is often easier said than done effectively, much less with an evidence-based approach such as stakeholder mapping and research utilization profiles. In the past, experiments with distilled policy briefs or executive summaries spoke to this strategy, but both experience and the data from this paper suggest that such a strategy may not actually address the real-world gaps. It is clear from this paper's findings that a good number of influential government officials, particularly those at the ministry of education, approach the world of literacy research and evidence from a different standpoint than researchers do. As a result, it may not be reasonable to expect that research findings, even the most robust, clearly distilled, and accessible, will be understood or utilized in the same way or in the ways intended by the funders or producers of that research. In the case of the Dominican Republic, the data from this paper suggest that research intended to inform literacy policy in the country will be well positioned if it is conducted in coordination with key ministry of education officials, including addressing aspects they are concerned about or interested in. It should also include perspectives of, if not the actual participation of, key literary figures that emerge from the findings as trusted scions in the sector. For example, the data is clear that any research

project that is actively promoted by key stakeholders such as Ancell Scheker, Dinorah de Lima, and/or Liliana Montenegro will be all the more likely to land in a position of high utility by ministry of education officials.

3) Be mindful of sensitivities in dissemination approaches. It is clear that introduction of research on early literacy in the Dominican Republic does not enter a values-neutral space when it is produced or shared. Key stakeholders are sensitive to the issue of approaches to literacy instruction: it is political as well as technical and tied to historically and culturally significant elements. This was evidenced by stakeholder hesitance to report on sensitive topics, or in some respondents' inclination provide a "correct" answer related to research preferences. Being mindful of the clear finding that pedagogical approaches to teaching reading in the Dominican Republic are sensitive and at times tinted by ideology, it would be wise for future policy interventions to focus on the effort of informing the debate and to take an agnostic stance on approaches. This will open rather than close doors and minds. Conversations based on shared understanding of evidence are the key.

4) Address culture of research issues at a broad level. The basis of an informed dialogue is best built up by Dominican stakeholders themselves, but donors and researchers (from within and outside the country) may have a role to play in addressing what stakeholders unanimously describe as the lack of a culture of research in the country. First, efforts to help better coordinate pre-service teacher training (both private and public) so that evidence-based literacy instruction techniques are explicitly taught, discussed, and explored through action research in the classrooms would be valuable. Second, as it is clear that many key stakeholders in the Dominican Republic believe that not enough quality research or evidence is produced within their own borders on education in general and literacy in particular, efforts to boost the quality of

research production as well as the understanding of research, both for critical and utilization purposes, are merited. Third, it is clear that research from other relevant academic disciplines, such as neuroscience and psychology, have a lot to say about literacy improvement, yet are not taken as seriously by Dominican literacy stakeholders as may be warranted. This issue cuts across each aspect of the research question on access, understanding, and utilization.

For further research: This paper relates most directly to the ongoing efforts of the LAC Reads Capacity Program funded by USAID, making the findings, conclusions, and recommendations somewhat idiosyncratic to that regional program, if not specifically to the Dominican Republic. Nonetheless, by entering this paper's contributions into the knowledge utilization in education literature, it provides at least the two contributions below that merit further exploration and consideration in applied research of a similar nature. These recommendations could be explored by the LAC Reads Capacity Program national partners, the RedLEI fellows in partner countries, or other applied researchers interested in the knowledge utilization space as it relates to literacy improvement.

1) Refine or adapt the interview instrument. Much of current USAID programming, for example, does not adequately factor in interests and practicalities of stakeholder behavior. I would suggest that future USAID programming geared towards policy-level impact include stakeholder analysis of some kind, particularly one that incorporates research understanding and utilization perspectives. Factoring in principles of behavioral economics to stakeholder engagement to account for biases may offer more insightful findings than those that typically focus on surface level information about demographics and channels of access. Including such principles enriched my research by helping to account for some non-intuitive findings related to interview responses as well as to consider motivations based upon real-world dynamics. As such

the semi-structured interview instrument devised for this research study is well positioned for further use for stakeholder mapping, and could be easily adapted for further interviews, or for an online survey.

2) Address generalizability questions for stakeholders more widely. This paper presents findings from an illustrative sample of one key country targeted by the LRCP. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations could form the basis for a future qualitative and quantitative analysis on the broader demand for early grade reading evidence across the LAC region and elsewhere, or perhaps could be part of an updated key stakeholder analysis script. This could help inform the way that the LRCP dissemination plan is developed and ultimately implemented, as well as help to establish user profile typologies that can help inform the ways in which technical assistance around evidence-based decision making is conducted by USAID and its implementing partners. For example, with more resources available than I had for the conduct of this research, a methodologically robust instrument could be shared with stakeholders in multiple countries that would both allow for statistically significant findings as well as for a wider regional discussion on the state of research utilization around literacy improvement or even educational quality in general.

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Appendix A

Informed Oral Consent Form (English)

Introduction and Informed Oral Consent:

My name is Michael Lisman. I am a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins University School of Education, and I would like to briefly interview you about research on early literacy and its relevance to your work.

This study aims to better understand how key education stakeholders in the Dominican Republic access, understand, and utilize research and evidence on early literacy. I ask you to join this study because, through consultation with the LAC Reads Capacity program funded by USAID, you have been identified as an important employee at a key stakeholder institution with significant interest and influence in early literacy in the Dominican Republic.

In the interest of full disclosure, I also work for USAID in Washington, DC. Please note that I am conducting this study, however, in affiliation with Johns Hopkins University, and not in my capacity as a USAID employee.

If you agree to participate, I have about 10 questions that I would like to ask you that are meant to guide an open discussion with you. I expect the discussion to last approximately 60 minutes or less. Your participation in this study will end after the interview is completed. Please note that you are under no obligation to answer any question you do not wish to answer, and you may stop the interview at any time for any reason with no consequence.

I will ask your opinion on matters related to educational research. I understand that your responses represent your personal opinion, and do not necessarily represent or coincide with those of <*your institution*> unless you indicate that they do.

During the interview, I will take notes and record the audio in order to transcribe the interview later on. I intend to keep the recordings and transcripts of this interview confidential, including your name and any personally identifiable information that you share. I will keep your information safe for one year by password protecting all your data on my computer, and then delete it. No personally identifiable information will be shared publicly or published in the final paper. Once completed, this final paper will be shared with you and other key stakeholders in the Dominican Republic, as well as donors. The objective is to improve the way that research is shared.

Finally, please note that there is no compensation for participation. If you have questions or concerns after this interview is completed, you may contact me, or Dr. Eric Rice at Johns Hopkins University (ericrice@jhu.edu).

Do you have any questions at this point?

Based on what I have described, do you consent to voluntary participation in this study?

Appendix B

Informed Oral Consent Form (Spanish)

Introducción y Consentimiento Oral Informado

Mi Nombre es Michael Lisman. Soy estudiante de doctorado en la Escuela de Educación de la Universidad Johns Hopkins. Quisiera hacerle una breve entrevista sobre investigación en la alfabetización y lectoescritura inicial y la relevancia de ésta en su trabajo. Para efectos de este estudio, defino "lectoescritura inicial" como la alfabetización de estudiantes en los primeros tres grados de la educación primaria. Este estudio pretende comprender mejor cómo los actores claves de educación en la República Dominicana acceden, comprenden y utilizan la investigación y evidencia sobre la lectoescritura inicial. Quisiera pedirle que se una a este estudio ya que, a través de una consulta con el programa financiado por la USAID, usted ha sido identificado como un actor clave el cual tiene un interés e influencia en la lectoescritura inicial en la República Dominicana.

Por otro lado, le comparto que actualmente trabajo para USAID en Washington, DC. No obstante, para el tema que nos ocupa, le pido tomar en cuenta que estoy conduciendo este estudio asociado con la Universidad John Hopkins y no en mi capacidad de empleado de la USAID. Al participar en este estudio, respondería a diez preguntas que servirán para guiarnos en una conversación abierta. Calculo que nuestra conversación durará aproximada sesenta minutos. Su participación en este estudio concluirá en el momento que termine esta entrevista. Por favor tome en cuenta que usted no está obligado a responder preguntas que no desee contestar, usted puede detener la entrevista en cualquier momento y por cualquier razón. En esta entrevista, le voy preguntar su opinión sobre temas relacionados con investigación educativa. Comprendo que sus respuestas son personales y no necesariamente representan o coinciden con las posturas de (su

institución), a menos que usted me indique lo contrario. Durante la entrevista, tomaré notas y grabaré en audio, esto con la finalidad de poder transcribir la entrevista posteriormente. Las grabaciones y transcripciones serán confidenciales, incluyendo su nombre y cualquier otra información personal que usted comparta conmigo. Mantendré su información asegurada con una clave de acceso, y luego de 3 años será borrada. No información que le pueda identificar a Ud. será publicada en el estudio final. Al ser completado, el estudio final será compartido con Ud. y otros actores claves en el país. El objetivo es mejorar la forma en que la investigación educativa es diseminada.

Por último, me permito aclarar que no habrá ningún tipo de compensación por su participación. Si después de esta entrevista usted tiene alguna pregunta o duda, puede contactarme a mi o al Dr. Eric Rice de la Universidad Johns Hopkins (ericrice@jhu.edu).

¿Tiene alguna pregunta hasta este momento? Basado en lo que le he descrito, ¿está usted de acuerdo en participar voluntariamente en este estudio?

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Instrument (English)

I would like to start with some basic background information:

a) How long have you been with (X) organization?
b) How long have you been in your current position?
c) Please briefly describe your professional and academic background before your current position.

(1) In your opinion, how would you describe the teaching and learning of early reading (children in grades 1 – 3) in the Dominican Republic? <UND>

1 Probe: What information do you base that perception on?

1 Probe: What do you think the principal causes of that are?
(If useful: teacher quality, education policy, investment levels, other?)

(2) Overall, what role does your organization have in improving reading outcomes in the Dominican Republic?

(3) In your current role, if you need relevant or trustworthy information or evidence on topics related to early literacy in the Dominican Republic, what sources do you seek out or use? <ACC>

(4) I'm going to read a list of sources of information on early-grade literacy in the DR. If you need reliable, updated information on early-grade literacy, how reliable are these sources in your opinion? Comments on each are welcome, though not necessary <ACC> <UND>

a) Non-governmental organizations (NGOs): UNIBE, INTEC, PUCMM, Centro Poveda, EDUCA, Fundación Inicia, Sur Futuro, World Vision, Dream Project – others?
b) International Organizations: IDB, USAID, World Bank, OEI, UNICEF, UNESCO – others?
c) National Government (such as the Ministry of Education) - particularly units or offices? Basic Education Unit? IDEICE? INAFOCAM?
d) Journals or magazines?
e) Google Search? Google Scholar?
f) Other online databases?
g) Close friends, colleagues, or mentors? Anyone in particular?
h) Other important sources I have not mentioned?

(5) What are the criteria, aspects, or characteristics that are most important to you when reading a document, report, or paper about early literacy in terms of usefulness to your work? How much time did you spend with the document, what are the most important sections, etc. <UND>

5 Probe: Can you think of a recent document (or not so recent) related to early literacy that represents these characteristics?

5 Probe: Help me understand your experience with that document. What was your process, and

what are your habits? That is, upon getting that document and deciding that it might be of interest, up through reading it and taking away what you did.

What is one recent example (last year, or so) of a useful document on literacy related to your work? (Probe: If nothing on literacy recently, how about education in general?)

5 Probe: Can you think of a recent example of a report or paper that you considered to be of low quality or unconvincing, for one reason or another?

5 Probe: According to your criteria and professional experience, what aspects made this document (or documents in general) unconvincing or below par? What are some of the most common aspects?

Now I have 3 questions based on a Likert scale (1-5). Aside from assigning a number, I would like to generate comments from you; the comments you give on each will be as useful as the number you assign.

(6) If you're reading a piece of research on literacy, how important or useful are the following aspects to you? <UND> <UTIL>

(Likert 1-5 scale, 1=least important and 5=most important, for each of the following)

a) That it clearly states the methodology used to obtain the information
b) That it utilizes primarily quantitative methodology
c) That it utilizes primarily qualitative methodology
d) That it is produced nationally or locally

e) That it is produced from another country (Probe: any particular country?)

f) That it is produced by people you personally know and respect

g) That it is published by a reputable institution

h) That it is available in Spanish

i) That it has an easily understandable executive summary

j) That you learn something new from it

k) That it supports something you are already inclined to believe

(7) Now I'm going to read 4 statements about educational research, in general.

For your work at X organization, tell me to what extent you agree with that statement <UTIL>

(Likert 1-5 scale, 1=disagree, 3=neutral, 5= agree, and for each of the following)

a) Educational research is most useful to me <u>if it can provide support for an action or point</u> I am trying to make.

b) Educational research is most useful <u>if it helps answer a difficult question</u> that I don't have an answer for.

c) Educational research is <u>just one part of a complex process of inputs</u> that I look at when making decisions.

d) Educational research is most useful to me i<u>f my organization commissioned and/or designed it</u>.

(8) Research on literacy today comes from various sources and fields. How useful are different disciplines of research to you in your work on education?

(1 = Least useful, 5 = Most useful) <UND> <UTIL>

a) Neuroscience (based on brain imaging)
b) Economics (based on rigorous quantitative models)
c) Sociology (based on studies of culture, ethnicity, and community issues)
d) Anthropology (based on ethnographic studies, for example)
e) Psychology (based on human behavior)
f) Education studies (based on examples directly from the classroom)
g) Other types?

(9) I would like to talk about the methods of early literacy instruction in the country. For starters, do you think there is more agreement or disagreement about the best way to teach early literacy in the Dominican Republic? Please explain, <UND>

9 Probe: How would you describe or characterize this (agreement, disagreement, perspective)?

9 Probe: Do you have an opinion on what particular approach, or aspects of a particular approach, for teaching children to learn to read in the Dominican Republic? <UND>

9 Probe: Tell me more. How did you come to feel that way? Is there specific people or research that helped convince you of this approach? <UND>

9 Probe: How connected to research or evidence do you feel the teaching of early literacy is in schools? <UND>

(10) With respect to questions about literacy research, some people speak about a lack of a "culture of research" in the Dominican Republic. What does this mean to you? <UND><UTIL>

10 Probe: How would you characterize the "culture of research" in education in the DR in general? (weak, strong, incipient, etc.)?

10 Probe: How about around literacy – same or different?

At this point, I have completed my interview questions. Is there anything else you would like to add or discuss before we finish? Thank you very much for your time and willingness to participate. If you have any questions, suggestions, or wish to reach me, please do not hesitate to contact me via email at mlisman@gmail.com, or Dr. Eric Rice at ericrice@jhu.edu.

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Instrument (Spanish)

Quisiera iniciar con un poco de información de fondo básica:

a) ¿Cuánto tiempo ha estado con la organización (X)?

b) ¿Cuánto tiempo ha laborado en su posición actual?

c) Por favor, describa brevemente su experiencia profesional y académica antes de su posición actual.

(1) En su opinión, ¿cómo describiría el nivel de enseñanza y aprendizaje de la lectoescritura inicial en la República Dominicana? (…¿Bajo, normal, alto?) <UND>

1 Explore: ¿En qué información basa esta percepción?

1 Explore: ¿Cuáles considera que son las principales causas de esto?

(Si es útil: calidad del maestro, política de educación, niveles de inversión, otros…)

(2) ¿A grandes rasgos, qué rol tiene <*su organización*> en el mejoramiento de los resultados de lectura en la República Dominicana?

(3) En su trabajo actual, si necesita información o evidencia relevante y confiable en temas relacionados con la lectoescritura en la República Dominicana, ¿cuáles serían los medios o lugares donde encontraría esta información? <ACC>

(4) Voy a leer un listado de posibles fuentes de investigación o evidencia sobre lectoescritura, y me puede responder o comentar cuales son los que Ud. utiliza, o considera relevante, confiable, o al contrario, menos relevante o confiable. Comentarios sobre todos están bienvenidos, pero no son necesarios. . <ACC> <UND>

a) Organizaciones no-gubernamentales (ONGs): ¿UNIBE, INTEC, PUCMM, Centro Poveda, EDUCA, Fundación Inicia, Sur Futuro, Visión Mundial, Proyecto Dream – otros?
b) Organizaciones internacionales: ¿BID, USAID, Banco Mundial, OEI, UNICEF, UNESCO – otros?
c) Gobierno Nacional (por ejemplo, Ministerio de Educación) - algún despacho en particular? IDEICE? INAFOCAM? ¿Dirección Básica? ¿Dirección Inicial?
d) ¿Periódicos o revistas? (Explore: ¿Cuáles cubren los temas educativos más confiablemente?
e) ¿Búsqueda de Google? ¿Google Académico?
f) Otra base de datos de investigación de Internet (Explore: ¿Cuáles utiliza?)
g) Amigos de confianza, colegas, mentores. ¿Quiénes?
h) ¿Otra fuente importante no mencionada?

(5). ¿Cuáles son los criterios, aspectos, o características más importantes de un documento, informe, o reporte sobre lectoescritura inicial para Ud., en términos de utilidad para su trabajo? <UND>

5 Explore: ¿Puede pensar en documento reciente (o no reciente) relacionado con el tema de lectoescritura que representa esas características?

5 Explore: Ayúdeme entender cómo fue su experiencia con ese documento. ¿Cuál es su proceso, y cuáles son sus hábitos? Es decir, desde encontrar el documento, tomar la decisión de que sea algo de interés, hasta leerlo o sacar lo que quisiera sacar. ¿Cuánto tiempo dura con el documento, cuáles son las secciones más importantes, etc.? <UND>

5 Explore: Ahora, ¿puede mencionar un ejemplo reciente de algún reporte que le haya parecido de baja calidad, o no convincente, por una razón u otra? <UND>

5 Explore: ¿Según su criterio y experiencia profesional, qué aspectos específicos hacen que este documento (o documentos no convincentes en general) está por debajo del nivel de calidad esperado? ¿Cuáles son los aspectos más comunes que ha visto?

Ahora tengo 3 preguntas que utiliza una escala Likert, 1 – 5. La idea de decirme un número (1-5) es genera comentarios. Cabe destacar que sus comentarios razonamiento son tan importantes como el número.

(6) Si está leyendo un informe o una investigación sobre lectoescritura, ¿qué tan importantes son los siguientes aspectos para usted, y por qué? <UND> <UTIL>

(Escala Likert 1-5, 1= menos importante; 5 = más importante, para cada uno de los siguientes)

a) Que claramente muestre la metodología utilizada para obtener información.

b) Que se base principalmente en metodología cuantitativa.

c) Que se base principalmente en metodología cualitativa.

d) Que sea producida por una fuente nacional o local.

e) Que sea producida desde otro país. (Explore: ¿algún país en particular?)

f) Que sea producida por personas que usted conoce y respeta

g) Que sea publicada por una institución de buena reputación.

h) Que esté disponible en español.

i) Que tenga un resumen ejecutivo fácilmente comprensible.

j) Que aprenda algo nuevo.

k) Que valide algo en lo que usted cree.

(7) Ahora voy a leer cuatro afirmaciones sobre investigación educativa en general.

Para su trabajo en la organización X, dígame en qué medida está Ud. de acuerdo con la siguiente afirmación: <UTIL>

(Escala Likert 1-5, 1= No está de acuerdo, 3 = neutral, 5 = totalmente de acuerdo, por cada una de las siguientes)

a) La investigación educativa es más útil si valida o apoya una iniciativa impulsada por mi institución.
b) La investigación educativa es más útil si ayuda a responder una pregunta difícil para la cual no tengo respuesta.
c) La investigación educativa <u>es sólo una parte de un proceso complejo para la toma de decisiones</u> educativas – y no necesariamente la más importante.
d) La investigación educativa es más útil para mí si mi organización la ha encargado o diseñado.

(8) Actualmente la investigación en lectoescritura se encuentra en varios recursos y campos. ¿Qué tan útiles son para usted las distintas disciplinas de investigación para su trabajo en educación? ¿Por qué?

(1 = menos útil, 5 = más útil) <UND> <UTIL>

a) Neurociencia (basada en imágenes cerebrales)
b) Economía (basada en modelos cuantitativos rigurosos)
c) Sociología (basada en estudios culturales, sociales o temas comunitarios)
d) Antropología (basada en estudios etnográficos)
e) Psicología (basada en conductas humanas)
f) Educación (basada en información sobre pedagogía, gestión escolar, etc.)
g) ¿Otros tipos?

(9) Hablemos ahora sobre los métodos de enseñar lectoescritura inicial en el país. ¿Piensa que hay más acuerdo o desacuerdo sobre la mejor forma de enseñar lectoescritura inicial en la República Dominicana? Por favor explique porqué. <UND>

9 Explore: En resumen, ¿cómo se puede describir? (el desacuerdo, o las perspectivas, o puntos de partida, o enfoques principales).

9 Explore: ¿Tiene usted alguna opinión sobre un enfoque para enseñar a leer en la República Dominicana? <UND>

9 *Explore:* ¿Cómo ha formado esta opinión? ¿Hay algunas personas en particular o alguna investigación que lo ha convencido sobre este tipo de enfoque? <UND>

9 Explore: Actualmente, ¿cómo se puede describir la conexión o correspondencia de la enseñanza de lectoescritura inicial y la formación de docentes en este área al universo de evidencia y investigación sobre lectoescritura inicial? <UND>

(10) Algunas personas me han hablado sobre una falta de una "cultura de investigación" en la República Dominicana. ¿Qué significa esto para usted? <UND><UTIL>

10 Explore: ¿Cómo caracterizaría la cultura de investigación educativa en el país?

10 Explore: ¿Y sobre lectoescritura, en particular, en comparación a otros temas de investigación educativa? (¿más, menos, igual?)

Han finalizado las preguntas que tengo ¿Hay algo más que usted quisiera añadir o discutir sobre este tema que no haya surgido, pero considera relevante para el estudio? ¿Tiene recomendaciones de cosas que debo leer o personas a quien debo entrevistar?

Antes de terminar, ¿tiene alguna duda o pregunta sobre el estudio o sobre su participación? Muchísimas gracias por su tiempo y buena voluntad de participar. Si tiene alguna pregunta, duda, sugerencia o desea contactarme, por favor no dude en hacerlo vía correo electrónico: mlisman@gmail.com, o al Dr. Eric Rice a su correo electrónico: ericrice@jhu.edu.

Biographical Statement

Michael C. Lisman is Acting Team Leader for Education in the Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) at the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Prior to joining USAID in 2011, he worked at the Inter-American Dialogue / PREAL as Central America Programs Coordinator; at Harvard University as a research coordinator; and as a Youth Development Peace Corps Volunteer in the Dominican Republic. He holds a master's degree in International Education Policy from Harvard University as well as a bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Rochester.

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